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By Marcel Berger

Ordeal by Fire
The Secret of the Masses
A Life at Stake

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Ordeal by Fire

The Secret of the Marne

A Life at Stake

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BY

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"ORDEAL BY FIRE," "THE SECRET OF THE MARNE," ETC.

TRANSLATED BY

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I

THE ANTIPODEAN ADVENTURE

PART I

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

JEAN DARBOISE, AUXILIARY

"WHO has no water-bottle strap?" mildly asked Sergeant Bousquet.

"And handkerchiefs, and neckties!" hurled the adjutant.¹ "My God, get a move on!"

"Me! Me!"

Some hands went out. But each man kept his foot on his heap of equipment, for fear of possible felonies. Little Cazenave was trying on his helmet, which was too big for him. He struck an attitude——

"Look! Who'll take a snapshot of me?"

"Now then! What's wanting still?" repeated the sergeant.

To this one a police-cap, to the next a "housewife," to the third, cartridge-pouches.

"What are the pouches for?" cried Cazenave, "seeing we don't carry rifles!"

"Perhaps they'll give you one, down yonder!" growled Corporal Thuillard; he was slender and pale, with sunken cheeks.

¹ In this case, a non-com. grade corresponding to regimental sergeant-major in British Army.—TR.

"It's a bad job! Nowadays, if they're arming the auxiliaries——"

"Now, ready?" Adjutant Lesdanon began again. "Eh, Bousquet?"

"I think we're all right."

A young fellow with a brown and refined face who was sitting on a pile of sacks in a corner of the shed, with his chin in his hands, seemed quite detached from the scene. The sergeant went up to him: "You, Darboise, are you fitted up?"

The man questioned shrugged his shoulders. "Me? I've hardly anything."

"How's that?"

"They've pinched the lot—my pouch, my puttees——"

"See to it, then!"

"Not worth while. To begin with, seeing I'm not going——"

"Really? You're not going?" said Lesdanon, aggressively.

Jean Darboise raised his fine proud eyes. "I've been turning it over," he said; "it would be too silly, as long as it's not my turn. They mustn't make mugs of men that way!"

"That's what you say!" The adjutant came nearer, with an evil grin. He was keeping his eye on Jean—an ugly customer he was. He had already had a little talk with the sergeant-major!

"I say this—it's quite simple—I ask—to speak to the commandant."

Lesdanon shrugged his shoulders. "Commandant Bineff? But it's he that's put us on the job; and he never——"

"That depends. When I explain to him——"

"I'll take you to him. Will you go?"

"Come on!"

Pale and silent, Darboise got up and followed the non-com. The witnesses of the scene looked at each other.

"I'll bet five francs he gets off!" murmured Cazenave.

"It's certain," the sergeant asserted, "that they're playing him a dirty trick. Passed auxiliary just a week ago—and hey presto!—they send him away!"

"It's a way they have in the army!"

The corporal said: "Look at Cazenave. He's not very charmed to be hooking it—but is *he* grouching?"

"Well," replied the little Bordelais,¹ "I've had fifteen months good at the depot. So what about it? No use worrying. There'll be some cushy jobs at Dunkerque."

On the way, the adjutant did not try to make his companion talk, and Jean was not sorry, for his heart was set throbbing by the simple thought of the injustice done him.

A thousand times no—it was not his turn! Had he not read it often enough, till he almost knew it by heart, that Order on Auxiliary Reliefs

¹Of the Bordeaux district.—TR.

for the Front?—"Territorials must be gradually replaced by young soldiers from the interior; but the departure order of the latter is rigorously determined—from Class 1917 to Class 1902, while those who have seen combatant service must be put back to the end of the list."

And they send *him* away, after his two campaigns (separated by a year of "temporary suspension"), after his two wounds!

Anger upheaved him at the recollection of the reception he had the night before at the Bureau, after he had put his case. Ah, the looks that the secretaries slid at him—they that had taken root on padded seats ever since the mobilisation! Ah, that insulting reply of the chief, the red-faced lusty dog! "What for, eh? You're on the list. Are you in the youngest classes, yes or no? Off you go, then,—clear out!"

Jean had said a word too much. "Pack of shirkers!" he had cried as he banged the door. Should he appeal to a higher authority? He would have done it had he not been conscious that his standing with the commandant was pretty bad. It was at the beginning of his stay at F—— that Captain Mascard had introduced him to Bineff. There was a very brief interview, in which the old lunatic, as soon as he knew that Jean was an artist, manifested but one desire—to get him to make an enlargement from a photograph of his little dead dog. When he had gone, Darboise burst out laughing: "The

dirty puppy! If they only paid regard to his paint-brush——!"

He had not seen Bineff again. Would he remember him? As he climbed the stairs to the "Treasury," Jean accused himself of having lacked diplomacy. Andrée, his wife, had urged him to be ready to oblige. It was not the first time that his independent temper had done him an ill turn in his dealings with people.

The commandant, seeing him enter, raised his nose from the piles of papers on his table, and his eyes began to gleam under their glasses: "What is it brings you here, my friend?"

"May I be allowed, commandant——?"

"I am asking you, but I have a notion. Your departure, I suppose?"

"You are aware, then, commandant, that—that it is not my turn?"

Bineff sniffed, took snuff—his inveterate failing. "Not your turn? You know that everybody says that, always?"

"There are Orders, sir."

"I believe you. It rains Orders. They say what they like. One pays attention to them—when one can. Moreover, they all contradict each other. As for me, they ask me for men, and I am obliged to provide them—auxiliaries, for Dunkerque, young men. I see your name, 'Darboise, auxiliary, Class 1913.' I send you ——"

"There are others——"

The commandant frowned: "Are you the judge, by chance?"

"At least, there are the 'indispensables.'"

"Exactly—and I forbid you the slightest reference to that subject."

Jean regretted his outburst: "I thought, too—that I ought only to be allotted as—secretary——"

"And by what right?"

"I had been told that the liberal professions——"

"What is your profession?"

Darboise reddened: "I thought you knew it, commandant. I am a painter."

"I might remember it," Bineff interposed ironically, "if I had ever seen any of your work. Meanwhile, I may remark that a painter—that doesn't necessarily indicate aptitude for secretarial work. I have here a list of professions; painters are not even mentioned."

Jean fathomed the man's insincerity. "And my arm?" he said.

He raised his left arm—bent, shortened, useless.

"I tell you what I tell them all. Go there first; if they can't do anything with you, they'll know how to send you back again."

With his case crippled and shrunk, Darboise looked as if he were seeking a final reason for insistence. Bineff then turned his piercing little eyes on him:

"A last word of advice, my lad. In your own interests, you'd better get yourself forgotten. Yes; it's already lucky for you that your affair

was squashed. There was a report against you by Sergeant-Major Bridron. Don't pretend to be surprised. It was I who said 'Hum! Let him go and get himself hanged somewhere else!' You ought to thank me. You behaved like a blackguard."

Jean's lips were moving.

"It is useless. I beg you to regulate——"

Turning on his heels, the young man went out, and a fog enfolded him.

CHAPTER II

TWO MASTER CARDS

LESDANON, who was waiting, received him with a broad smile: "Now then—what did I say?"

While going down behind him, Jean turned over in his mind some fancied loopholes. Appeal to the Service de Santé?¹ The chief surgeon was a good sort, but timorous, and he would dread an encounter with Bineff. To Mascard? Devoid of influence, and anxious not to compromise himself. He had no other supporter in F——. Give in, then? Like the big child that he was, Jean now saw in the matter above all a question of self-respect. The whistling of the adjutant at his side exasperated him, as well as the vision of the broad smiles he would see unfold themselves on the faces of his comrades. Biting his lips, he considered going to extreme measures. Resist point-blank, and refuse to go under these conditions? What did he risk? Prison. Very well, one would see. There would be a row. With the connections that he numbered in the world of the Press! Chinard, whom he had seen that

¹ The French equivalent of the British R.A.M.C.—TR.

morning—Chinard would not abandon him. He felt in his heart that he was about to make some irremediable mistake; that he could not help himself.

At the storeroom they found the sergeant, alone. He had just sent the newly equipped men away, in charge of the corporal.

"Papa Bineff has given him something to go on with!" said Lesdanon, triumphantly.

Jean was within a second of letting the words slip that could not be taken back. By chance, the adjutant left them—he was expected at the mess for a game of cards. And Bousquet said gently to Jean: "All's ready for you, Darboise; I've completed your outfit."

He showed him two new pouches that he had hunted up. Jean did not stir.

"Come on!" The sergeant came up to him: "I know well enough it's not your turn. No more than mine. I, too, am the victim of a got-up job——"

"I should be within my rights——"

"What to do? Are they ever in the right here?"

"It's hateful, hateful!"

The young man rapped the floor with his foot. Bousquet went on: "Be on your guard. They're looking for an ugly story against you. And then, I too, I should get myself slanged if I didn't take you."

The argument was a laughable one. Fortunately the sergeant had a better inspiration:

"You're married, eh? What would your wife advise you?"

His wife! Jean could see Andrée, and he remembered how she had besought him to be reasonable. He bowed down, in silent resemblance to the other who was busy with the knot of his tent-cloth. A minute later both were going down towards the town; and as though to make Jean forget the heavy bundle on his shoulder, he saw the smile of a well-loved face.

For last evening, when his departure order was confirmed, he had instantly made a fixed determination to see his dear one again. An official permit was too difficult to obtain. Provided with a spurious authority handed to him by Machevent, the old stager of the depot, he had jumped into the train, and at eleven o'clock, he rang the bell of the outer door of their house at Sceaux.

He had just got his slippers on, when Andrée appeared at the window. "You, you!" she cried as she ran in, and then, as if scenting misfortune: "What's happened? What's the matter with you?"

"I have—I have to go again."

She stood still, thunderstruck, her hands on her heart.

"Dearest, it's as auxiliary—for Dunkerque. There are more terrible things than that!"

"Oh, don't frighten me again like that!"

Poor Andrée! Always disconcerted by the

inconsequent suddenness of military decisions, she had fancied him—in spite of his arm and the recent decision of the Rejoining Committee—sent back to that baleful Douaumont, from which he had returned only by a miracle. But now, having learned the truth, she showed courage. He thought she was even too quickly resigned to it. “Separated again! Think of it!”

“I shall come to see you.”

“Will you be able?”

“Why, yes; there are ways—” She was already turning over her plans. “Mamma will look after the little one.”

“Poor Momo! For a certainty they don’t want me to have any pleasure in him!”

He went to the cot. The child was lying on his side, his pretty little profile standing out against the white pillow, his tiny hands holding the sheet away. Jean bent low and kissed his forehead, with the wish that all fathers have—“May there be no more war in your time.”

As he sat down to rest and threw his cap aside Andrée put her arms tenderly round his neck and asked him for further particulars: “But how does it happen that you are chosen?”

“A monstrous injustice!”

Her youth had been sad. She had lost her father when quite young, and her mother had brought her up amidst material worries of the worst kind. So she had had earlier experience than he of the meanness and maliciousness of

man. Slower than he to lose self-control, she listened to him as he paraded his grievances—a docker on the Dunkerque quays, that was what they had found for him! The life of a cart-horse! So much for his mutilation!

“I’d rather know you were there than at Verdun!”

He shrugged his shoulders: “To be sure. If only I could see the chance of doing some of my own work!”

“Ah, that—that’s a secondary matter.”

“How secondary?” His art? Why, that and his affection for her were the whole of his life—to draw and paint, the twin effort to transcribe the mysteries of form. Andrée, the perfect partner, was aware of it. She added: “Well, but you’ll find new types and subjects down there. And then, if you dislike it too much—well, we’ll get you out of it all right.”

The memory of that talk now flooded him as with the perfume of consolation. It was his companion, he reflected with a stirring of gratitude, who had switched his thoughts in that direction.

“You—are you married, sergeant?” he asked, suddenly friendly.

Receiving a negative, Jean asked: “Have you been—down yonder?”

Bousquet seemed a little embarrassed: “At the beginning. Several weeks only. I was sent back, sick.”

A silence followed, and then the sergeant thought it his duty to question Jean: "You've been there twice?"

"Yes. The second time, at Douaumont——"

As usual, the name had a magical effect: "Were you—in the big attack?"

"It was there that I got—my arm hit."

They continued to go their way side by side. Jean, discovering admiring deference in the other's silence, had a fancy to go over again in his mind those forty memorable hours at the end of February—the order that reached them in Champagne, their immediate departure, their alighting at Verdun itself on a wild and bitter night that resounded with the German artillery, the rousing proclamation signed by the major-general. Under a leaden sky and along muddy roads they had marched. At dawn they had filed past as on parade in a snow-covered field. Ah, Jean remembered even the way in which he bore his rifle. Two men watched them pass—Castelnau, dismounted, thickset and vigorous under his cloak; and beside him, Balfourier, with snow on his beard; a great hour, when the chiefs and the rank and file exchanged a silent oath.

Of the battle itself, he only retained a confused memory: the advance over the bare fields, under the horror of the barrage fire, the finding and dislodging of the enemy from the trenches, his own furious excitement; and then, forward endlessly on the corpse-strewn slope. The savage shouting

of their host, the ceaseless blowing of bugles, the crackle of machine-guns, the whistle and thunder of the big shells, all this was a mingled memory. From out the tumult, only a few sharp pictures arose—that of the prone body of Captain Monet, whose severed neck streamed blood; and that of a Saxon in peaked helmet, in the act of hurling a bomb, at whose feet he threw his own, so that the Saxon disappeared as if he had been snatched aloft.

And now Jean could see himself again, wounded, his left arm hanging limp, sent back—what a journey!—and a long stay in the station at Troyes where he met Antoine Morand, editor of the *Quotidien*, a journalist of the Jules Verne sort, who was running from stretcher to stretcher to extract copy from them, and who turned out to know Chinard.

Chinard! Darboise's reverie came to an end at that name, the name of one of his few remaining friends. Chinard! It was seven years since they entered the School of Painting, since their studies and their tastes came so close together, near enough for them never to spare each other the truth, whether flattering or harsh. *There* was one, thought Jean—without a shadow of envy—who had no cause to complain of the war! Sent to the front at the start, and wounded, he had had that rare luck to be looked after in hospital by Paulette Dartigue, the actress, and mistress of Letourneur the banker, who owned the *Quotidien*.

Through the young lady's influence, his drawings began to appear in the great daily and had immediately taken the public fancy. They were the first realistic records—in October, 1914,—of an artist fresh from the fighting, and their success was enormous. Chinard was quick to take advantage of his luck. His facile talent worked wonders. What a jump in two years, what a soaring flight! He was the man of the moment in his line. Though still in uniform, he was provided with a sinecure at the Ministry of Marine, thanks to the protection of his great patron.

Good old Chinard! That very morning Andrée had made him go and surprise Chinard as soon as he was up, in the smart flat which he and his mother occupied at 33 Rue Franklin.

"To Dunkerque? As a docker? Why, they're mad!" Immediately he added: "I'll speak about it to Letourneur. You must be got out of that."

In that hope Jean had left him. It comforted him to think of it. He flattered himself that he was not altogether unknown to the managing director of the *Quotidien*. Were there not, last year, two of his little sketches on the third page of that daily? Come—what with backstairs influence and real ability, he had two master cards in his hand!

CHAPTER III

THE TERROR BY NIGHT

WHEN they arrived at their quarters, the hangar in the Rue St. Paul, Jean let his bundle drop, sat on the first palliasse he came to, and wiped his forehead. Thus disburdened, he scanned with inquisitive and ironical eye the composition of the detachment with which he was setting off.

Besides himself there was one other wounded in the war—Habert, a sickly outcast, who had received a piece of shell in his back at Perthes, and hobbled lamentably. What would they do down yonder with a man whom they had had to give up as useless even at the depot? For the most part the others were auxiliaries of the young classes, who had not been under fire. Jean did not look at them without some slight contempt—thick-headed clodhoppers, Mortas, Yvonnat, and Poitou. There was Prestrot, Mascard's orderly, whom the commandant was sending away because the captain had someone for the place. There were four who always stuck together, four Bretons of the Draught Corps, arrived that morning from Quimper. Cazenave, a clerk in the Discount

Bank, contrasted strongly with his surroundings. How many departures had he not dodged since the beginning—always under the overbearing protection and favour of Bineff, who had just suddenly failed him! Cazenave was the first to talk of injustice and demand his rigid right to be employed in an office.

He had been away for some minutes and just reappeared with an anxious air. Quartermaster Lemaire, who had been at Dunkerque for eight months, had just outlined for him a sinister picture of the life one led down there: "It isn't so much the hard work, because, as for that, if one gets on good terms with the major——"

"What then?" Jean asked.

"Ah, the bombardments!"

"Pooh!"

"Pooh? There's nothing to pooh about!"

Cazenave proceeded to give details, quoted the totals of killed and wounded. Sometimes by the Taubes, sometimes by Zeppelins, and at random by the big shells, fired over twenty miles away. Ah, above all, those scenes at the harbour, where they worked, and which was specially marked!

"You've only got to make yourself scarce—in the docks!" said Jean, rather ironically.

"Some of the pals did that, and they were done in the water." The little Bordelais continued: "Every evening in the summer, or nearly, it starts again—the bombs. Then you see the few

people who still live in the town fleeing along the roads to take cover among the dunes. In the morning one counts the missing."

His audience had come nearer, to listen to the talker whom his own words were inebriating, and all their faces were dark with uneasiness. Then Jean began to laugh—"Glad you told us who gave you all those details! He's well known—Quartermaster Lemaire! A fine scaremonger!"

"To hell with you!" retorted Cazenave. "Have there been any killed—yes or no?"

"What's a few killed?"

"And suppose we're among 'em, what then?"

Although he felt the vague hostility around him, Jean replied: "Compare it, my dear sir, with what went on at Verdun. On the days we attacked, I'll bet there were more rattled down in a minute than in your Dunkerque in six months."

Here the corporal intervened: "They can't be compared, to begin with. We—we're auxiliaries; it's none of our job to get killed!"

"How frightened for your skins you all are!" Jean turned towards Habert, seeking support. "That's so, old man, you that's been there? Don't they give you the bellyache?"

The man with the crippled loins threw at him a glance of spiteful defiance: "Yes, I've been there—all the more reason why I resent going to get myself laid out!"

Darboise did not reply. Some of Andrée's advice came back to his mind—they who had been

to the front and come back to the rear should not make a boast of their different viewpoint!

There were still two hours before leaving. Jean wrote to his wife a short note which he had the courage to make merry and confident.

Nothing attracted him in the town. He reckoned no friends in this depot where chance had brought him five weeks before. His friends of former days—how few were left him in the world! After Chinard, there was just Auguères who had been wounded in September and had just returned to the front. Sadly Jean went over the friends he had lost by death in the last two years—and then he included only his kindred. Of his four groomsmen, Templier and Boussac had fallen at the outset. And Lucien—the poor little brother whose loss their mother did not survive—Jean's eyes filled with tears at the memory of the two-fold mourning.

What a time it was! For long he sat with staring eyes, plunged in mournful reflection. His generation was sacrificed, and those that came before, and that came after—without consideration of the worth or ability of individuals—men of genius, perhaps, mown down like grass. Imagine that in August, 1914, they had nearly sent to his death the Territorial Claude Boucheron, his professor, a master of the race of Rembrandt and Callot, the foremost living etcher!

With this thought Jean returned to his art.

The cult of beauty and love, of expression and form—he had lived for That. And now, though it uplifted mankind, it seemed to have lost all prestige, all attractiveness in the eyes of those others, among these torments of hell. He felt himself plunged into a lower world. From his hand-bag he sought out and opened a roll of paper—rough notes and sketches of his former activities. Sincerely, Jean admired himself for what he had then accomplished. Today, the road was lost! It was only for conscience' sake that he was taking his pencils and box of water-colours into exile with him. Only too likely that inspiration would be wanting down there, when he had finished his day's work as a docker!

Darboise had voluntarily abandoned the pay due to him, in his desire not to set foot again inside the Bureau. But a special order reached him. The chief had sent for him.

"Always the same men!" Thus Bridron welcomed him, in an angry voice.

"What have I done?"

"You don't know that when a man is going away he must present himself at the Bureau?"

"Excuse me, I do know. It's already happened once to me—to go away."

"Don't try to be clever. You went there, no doubt, just the same as the others, because you couldn't get out of it. Only today, they tell me, you tried to take your hook."

The sergeant-major tittered, and the clerks followed suit in chorus.

"Let him be, friend," the quartermaster intervened, "as long as he's ridding us of him."

"He does right. I promise you he wouldn't have shut us two up!"

Jean kept control of himself. White with humiliation, he took the two and a half francs due to him and signed the receipt with a shaking hand. Cazenave had been present at the scene and they went out together. "The dirty devils! They'd plague you to death."

Jean said: "I'll get even with them, mind, see if I don't." He was thinking of the *Quotidien* and Chinard.

"They've got you all the same, eh? They're making you go——"

"Hum! Perhaps I shan't be a long stayer in their Dunkerque!"

When they regained their quarters they fell across the corporal, who questioned Darboise: "Hey, you! Why weren't you at the rationing? Now it's all dealt out! I don't care a damn—you can do without!"

Jean made a sign of disillusion. Now he would have to fast during the two days' journey!

"I'll dodge that for you, old chap," said Cazenave, slyly; "we'll find a way."

"Thanks," said Jean, gratefully.

The other lowered his voice. "Say, if you've got a friend, too, you must give me a lift!"

CHAPTER IV

CHERISHED DETAILS

KNAPSACKS on backs! In short-column formation they are marched off towards the station. Second-hand soldiers, of whom many had never even been classed, their swollen pouches, their badly adjusted straps, and their hand-bags gave them a sorry and awkward bearing. On the way they met a long file of "unfit," returning from inspection; most of them had been wounded, but at least they were war-proven. A shouting arose and followed them—who were going away without weapons.

Jean almost regretted that departure, five months before, from Carcassonne, where under the December sun the crowd hailed them as men who would soon be going into action.

.

Sad in his solitude, Jean felt vaguely sorry that he had opposed, mainly for pecuniary reasons, his wife's wish to accompany him as far as F——. There was no one to greet, not even Papa Mascard, who was content to send him by Prestrot the

promised card addressed to the captain that would command the detachment down yonder.

They went forward for two hours. Then there was a long stop at a junction station. Jean managed to get out of the station and take a turn in the country. The sky was cloudy, and the sun setting without radiance. When he returned the corporal caught him: "They've been looking for you. Who gave you leave——?"

"The sergeant."

"The sergeant? He told me you hadn't asked him."

The others had had their meal. Jean thought he would get some dinner in the restaurant he had noticed opposite the station. When he went in, the manager stopped him with an impolite gesture: "No admittance to privates; I've got the officers' mess."

Cazenave was walking with Bousquet—he who had promised him a share!

After more hours of travel, they arrived by night in the huge dark station of Rouen, full of the hissing of engines under steam. They had to find the exit, show their travelling papers, and cross the dark town, with which Prestrot by chance was familiar. In the Northern station complaisant railwaymen led them to second-class compartments, where they slept until early morning.

And the whole of the next day the train dragged itself idly along. The detachment occupied double

compartments with low partitions between. The corporal, Prestrot, and Cazenave stuck to their cards. For fourth player, they had, turn and turn about, Habert and the sergeant, who gave up playing after Longueau, and plunged into a popular novel.

Darboise remained quite isolated. Sometimes it gratified him, and he wrapped himself voluntarily in a rather distant seriousness. Then sometimes the silence weighed on him. Mortas, seated facing him, only nodded his head when, on the outskirts of Amiens, Jean remarked to him: "Ah, we're passing not far from the front!"

A column of lorries, half-seen along a high road, had recalled to him the formidable organisation of Verdun.

It was the middle of April. A stubborn rumour already ran that it was from this side the great offensive would be undertaken. Ah, that spring-time, whose coming was wont to rejoice the heart of man, but this time would mark the heaping anew of hecatombs! Great trees swayed their trembling branches along the side of the track, and Jean, standing at the door, mourned at the sight of the fields dappled with daisies and primroses. "The great offensive"—God! how many meadows did it mean should be changed into charnel-houses!

But he quickly put aside these unnerving thoughts—for the end of the ordeal was near, for victory was ripening! These countless trains of

munitions and stores, chiefly English, that they passed in rows on the sidings, gave him an exalted idea of the strength of France and of that of her allies, colossally increased. After passing Étaples, where the sea began to appear, already foaming and grey, he admired the series of English and Canadian camps, a swarming of white tents that enlivened the dunes. With a sympathetic eye he followed the Tommies in their exercises. And through the window of a tavern did he not surprise the kiss received by a pretty barmaid? Ah, the fascination of that race!

Farther on, some Scottish riflemen climbed into their carriage, big fellows, athletic and careless, who carried themselves proudly, and chatted noisily. All had *brisques*¹ on their sleeves. Jean reddened. What would they think of his companions and himself? Modestly he tried to make them see his chevron.

An endless journey! At each stop, Jean felt a haunting remorse that he had written nothing to Andrée. Only at Boulogne did he decide to do it. Here they stayed for two hours, but he confessed to only ten minutes—an excuse for merely scribbling a few words.

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Evening was falling when they set off again.

¹ The word stands, in the French Army, for \wedge -shaped badges worn on the left arm to indicate the duration of service at the front.—TR.

They had eaten a snack, and Jean was living on provisions bought at the buffet at Rouen.

The card-players were putting their cards away and composing themselves for sleep. Then Bousquet, who had just finished his reading, came and sat by Jean: "How goes it?"

"Not so badly," Darboise smiled. He had borne the sergeant a little ill-will for his indifference, but he was always ready to meet half-way any one who made him any advances.

"If only we can be late!" murmured the other, "—so that we can miss the connection at Calais!"

"Why?" asked Jean in surprise.

"Because otherwise we shall reach Dunkerque station at eleven, and we shall have to sleep there."

"Well?"

"They say that the station—is bombarded every night."

"A risk to be run!"

"Thank you for nothing!"

Bousquet confided his plan to him, which consisted of going to earth as soon as they reached Calais. Jean only feebly approved. For a minute or two they remained face to face without speaking. Their looks wandered over the fading country. The sergeant broke the silence at last: "What sort of life are we going to lead down yonder?"

"You, as a non-com.—supportable, I imagine."

"Yes? You think so?" That was what he had wanted to be told.

"Try to arrange for me to stay with you," Jean suggested.

"Right you are. I've already promised Caze-nave to claim him for my section."

Night had now fallen in earnest. Outside they could no longer make out, beyond the regulated swaying of the telegraph wires, anything but ashen expanses, sown with distant points of light. Their comrades slept and snored. They two alone remained awake in conversation. Jean reflected, and not ironically, that this was the time favourable to heart-openings.

Bousquet suddenly said: "Prestrot—did you see his mother at the station?"

Darboise had indeed noticed her, the old peasant with a black cap. Ah, how the remark touched him!

"Have you still your mother, sergeant?"

"Yes. Have you?"

"Dead—last year. Just two months after my brother. She had watched over him to the end, at the hospital."

"Ah, you also lost—how old was he?"

"Twenty."

The sergeant sighed: "For my share, my two brothers-in-law have been killed."

Once approached, these subjects stirred in them the same living springs of human pain and sorrow. In the darkness Jean could no longer see his interlocutor's features, but he thought he could feel the affectionate look turned upon him.

"Is it long—since you were married?" Bousquet asked again.

"Three years."

As the sergeant did not reply, it was Jean who went on: "Ah, when the war came and surprised us!"

"You were—where?"

"At Barbizon."

Jean was conscious of the tacit invitation. Without further pressure he gave the cherished details whose intimate sweetness it soothed him to recall.

They had made up their minds to go again in 1914 and pass the month of July among the surroundings which a year before had seen their first weeks of love. What delight to find themselves again under the same roof, in the same room, with the window looking out on to oaks that trembled with reincarnate foliage, and among the changing moods of nature to foster—all by themselves—an illusion of eternity.

How far from the world they lived there! They read no newspapers, and in the shade of high hedges they took delightful, erratic walks. Sometimes they wandered after dark, steered by the stars, and sat at the cross-roads to listen to the bellowing of stags. By day sometimes they would hire a carriage. In a subdued voice Jean recalled that afternoon when his wife insisted on being trusted alone to drive their dear little English car and the grey pony. They were surprised on

the road by a storm. Andrée bravely stuck to the reins and was content to find shelter under the big hood of her husband. He could still feel the touch of those brown locks on his cheek. Nor did they give up the projected detour by Arbonne. When they reached the edge of the forest the downpour had ceased, and the blazing sun of summer had reappeared from behind the heavy clouds, which it had dissolved into transparent vapours, quickly drying the pools in the road and drawing up the drops that glistened on the leaves. The view over the Ile de France¹ which opened before them with the mellow grace of a widened horizon as they came out of the forest splendours had nothing to hold one's attention. Whence came the keen delight that both felt pervade them? Andrée stopped the pony. They stood up and drank in the wide prospect of undulating golden meadows, where the grey-blue roofs of a few houses grouped themselves here and there around a pointed steeple. A girl in a straw hat was guiding a flock of sheep, a fair-haired girl who saluted the lovers with a smile.

Was it a presentiment, a coincidence? Not a murmur of the threatening political situation had made itself heard to them. Indeed, that afternoon the world seemed almost too pure to them, nature too harmonious, the life before them too bright—as if it were the eve of some convulsion.

¹ To the north-east of Paris; roughly, between Amiens and Rheims. The "forest" is that of Compiègne.—Tr.

They had both looked at each other and murmured, without knowing why, "July thirtieth, 1914." And they went back almost in silence, not so much in satisfaction at having found something like complete earthly happiness, as troubled by a sadness which sounded almost in sobs. "Don't you think it was curious?"

"Very," Bousquet agreed.

Jean was silent for a while. Yes, a singular intuition. How often, since that day, Andrée and he had recalled it. In a sort of doubt, they had told no one of it, not even Auguères, who came next day to lunch and to tell them—what a thunderbolt it was!—of the inevitable disaster; not even Auguères, whom they had not seen again.

Jean felt surprised that he had told Bousquet all these confidences, but he did not go so far as to regret it. To be sent away together is a uniting thing, and perhaps this was tomorrow's true friend—this man who twice already had guided their talk into those paths where men who are neither friends nor enemies fear to tread. Darboise took one step more: "My wife," he said, with touching bashfulness, "I was telling you about my wife. Shall I show you—her portrait?"

The other's silence giving assent in the darkness, Jean unbuttoned his overcoat, rummaged about, and produced a photograph from his pocket-book. "Here!"

The other did not put out his hand: "Here, sergeant," Jean insisted.

Just then a jerk of the train made the oil-lamp send a gleam into their gloomy corner; and by its fleeting ray he saw that Bousquet was asleep.

Then Jean smiled at himself, bitterly. He looked at his slumbering companions—wearied human cattle. But his looks fell back upon the poor photograph in his hand, and something passed into him from the being for whom life was worth living! Suddenly he pressed it to his lips, like a schoolboy.

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Bousquet's hopes of Calais went pitifully astray. For as the detachment under his guidance filed towards the sidings, a belaced watcher questioned them in a supercilious way, and upon their embarrassed reply shook his head decisively—"No one must sleep here."

Corporal Thuillier counselled asking permission from the military commissary, but seeing from afar that high personage repelling a man on leave, took away from them all desire to approach him.

The Dunkerque train was there, ready to start. It was a long one, made up entirely of old third-class coaches, and a peculiar feature of it was that three-quarters of the windows were missing.

"Is that—bombs?"

"Probably."

There being no civilian travellers, they got

settled without difficulty. Each man commanded a side. Lying full length, Darboise fell asleep in suddenness and resignation as the train started.

The grating of his door as it was opened woke him up, and a rough voice said: "All change here!"

In complete darkness he rebuckled his waist-belt, groped for his pouches and hand-bag, and cautiously got out: "Dunkerque?"

No one answered and the darkness was opaque. But after a few steps he heard oaths, and the jostling of his pals. They were there.

Which was the way to go? A pale gleam attracted him—a dark lantern was trailing it along the platform. He butted into the railwayman who was carrying it: "You've got it dark here."

"Not dark enough."

"Where's the way out?"

"Come with me."

He followed the man. The darkness was only perforated in the distance by many-coloured points of fire. With parched tongue and cramped limbs, Jean tried to joke with his guide: "Is it on account of the Taubes," he asked, "these precautions?"

"Of course!"

His foot slipped and he nearly fell into an excavation. "What's that? That hole?"

"A bomb hole."

"When was it done?"

"Last night."

"Were there any killed?"

His companion did not reply, and his silence was even more significant. Jean did not leave him by an inch.

They went along by indistinct masses—the tender, the engine, which blew noisy steam around their legs. In spite of himself, Jean had to acknowledge that this arrival had something oppressive and sinister about it. “Every night,” the sergeant had said, and he ought to be well informed. This station, no doubt, was a rallying-point for the enemy squadrons, the sowers of explosion and death. Darboise shivered in his skin.

Since his wound, had he not set himself to construct plans for the future, as if he had “done his bit”? “After the war,” he had thought, he would try this, he would do that. Ah, the cruel consciousness came to him that he had not yet finished with it. His death returned to possibility. His lot was once more in the hands of the brutal Goddess of War! Was he not indeed one of the condemned generations?

He had rejoined his comrades. The sergeant had just delivered the transport order. They were guided towards the hangar where they were to pass the night. There was no cellar, nor floor above them; no shelter in case of bombardment. Jean followed the others, stumbling over the turntables and switches. This time, far from chaffing the timid ones, he turned upon them and upon himself—youth that had had the ill-luck to grow up in this age of the world—his heartrending pity.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

ARRIVAL AT ST. POL

THE little company had just halted at the door of their quarters—a big school, brick-built.

“Hullo! No one was expecting you!” a whiskered sentry cried.

No warning of their arrival! It was an unlucky coming, for there had been an alarm in the night.

“How—an alarm?”

“The chaps spent the night armed and equipped in the yard.”

“Even the auxiliaries?” Cazenave asked.

“You bet!”

“So now they’ll be having a snooze?”

“Snooze be damned! They mustered the fatigues at twenty past five, just as usual.”

“Hum! That doesn’t sound very good, eh, Darboise?”

Jean shook his head without replying, for his impressions continued to be painful. Oh, that first view of the country from the road by which they left the station! First, there were the cold, deserted quays, bordering the leaden water of the

canal; then greyish houses, some of them abandoned, several in yawning ruins, the result of bombardments. After passing the Mardyck Gate, there was an expanse of beggarly dunes, which a thin screen of pines did not succeed in beautifying; and so to St. Pol at last, where they were to live—a low quarter, with its squat houses damp-corroded, slatternly women at the doors, and children in dirty rags. It rained, too. A heavy downpour, slanted by a cutting wind, had lashed their faces. A disagreeable climate, and Jean felt that for him it would be a source of incurable vexation. He the amorous Provençal, an exile from shining skies and a sun which burns the face and warms the heart as it mellows and gilds the buildings, an exile in the land of the north wind, was overwhelmed with despair as was Ovid on Massilian shores.

The morning passed away for them in dismal waiting. Jean, accompanied by Cazenave, took a turn round their quarters. Under a lean-to shed in the yard they saw the cooks, bare-armed and dirty-aproned, moving round the stoves. They crossed the unappropriated class-rooms, where soiled straw mattresses were aligned on broken insulators. In the middle of each room were two long tables, one on the top of the other, with its legs in the air. On the shelves that ran along the walls, crusts of bread were lying about and all sorts of oddments. There was a look of sham cleanliness, of regulated misery.

Cazenave said: "We shall have to bluff a room in the town!"

At ten o'clock the sergeant-major appeared. He was a big man with a fine beard, whom the incidents of the night had put in a bad temper. He led the new arrivals to the Bureau, where a secretary—he was a schoolmaster called Percevain, slow and ceremonious—gave them various instructions: "Above all, never be without your identity disk," he advised each man.

"Why is that?" Bousquet asked.

"So that they may know who you are in case of—accidents."

"Ah, yes! The Taubes come here pretty often."

The chief put in a brief allusion to the bombardment of two days previously—eight poor devils on furlough in a railway carriage, blown to bits.

"Is it always the station that's aimed at?"

"St. Pol, too, for some time now."

"What does one do, when they—begin to topple down?"

"You wait till they've finished toppling!"

The captain was not there—they doubted if he would come that morning. Quartermaster Saupiquet came in, with his report-book under his arm. He came from headquarters.

"Anything new?"

"Nothing—ah, yes!—Soldiers who go to the harbour must now wear their shrapnel helmets."

"They don't know what to make up!" said the chief, shrugging his shoulders.

They chatted about the alarm in the night. Was it simply a practice alarm? Hum! Saupiquet intimated that suspicious movements of war-vessels had been observed at sea off Zeebrugge.

"Likely! We shouldn't have been able to dodge the saunter to the West Defence!"

"The West Defence?" queried Bousquet.

"That's where we've got to go and get shot if anything big turns up."

"I don't understand," the sergeant went on. "Seeing that we're auxiliaries——"

"They'll take no notice of that. The Governor's worse than a pope."

"Let him look out!" said Cazenave, laughing, "with our friend Darboise here who's got friends on the newspapers!"

"You?" The chief stared at Jean. "Do you happen to be a journalist?"

"Not exactly. I'm—a painter. But I've had some drawings in the papers."

There was a chilly silence. Saupiquet was going to speak but kept quiet. Jean enjoyed the effect he had produced.

They returned, and Cazenave sounded him. "The game to play, eh, will be to get a job in the Bureau?"

"Yes. But those that are there——?"

"They're not so safe! I've been learning things. All three of them belong to the armed service!"

Now Jean understood their disapproving looks—shirkers who must have fumed even when they only turned over his squad-book!

Dinner-time was approaching, yet the place remained empty. Jean was surprised: "Are there no more than this for dinner?"

A cook replied: "The fatigue chaps chew at the Textile Hangar."

"They used to come back here one time," said another.

"Then they discovered that place so that the chaps can jaw for another hour."

They took their places at the greasy table. Cazenave was fastidious. He had been mobilised eighteen months but he had never had to eat at the general mess. Jean was more resigned—after what he had suffered and seen in the course of his two brief campaigns. The other's lamentations even irritated him into angry protest. The sergeant's attention was attracted—Depussay, the shuffling walker—and he came towards them: "Your table not clean?"

"Disgusting!" exclaimed Cazenave.

"Very well! After inspection, as you'll have nothing to do, I'll give you some soap and brushes. There are fifteen of you and there are eight tables." He rubbed his hands in satisfaction: "That's a very good idea."

The inspection! Cazenave, gathering tips about the little major, received different opinions. Not

a bad sort, some assured him. A chap that knew his job, but quite harsh enough. That was necessary! Otherwise there would always be fellows who wouldn't care a rap for him. Nivard, the orderly, was more severe. "Corentin? A rotten lazy-bones, who takes care to keep in with his betters!"

They reached the infirmary under the guidance of Flatus the sick-sergeant, a lean man with a scarred face. "Another of the armed service!" whispered Nivard; "but you bet they'll not comb him out!"

A simple make-believe, that inspection! Bousquet, who first presented himself, and who pulled from his pocket a whole bundle of certificates, was repelled by the major with a gesture: "Pooh! You'll have little enough to do here, you a non-com.! Fit," he proclaimed. "Next!"

The next was Cazenave. "Auxiliary? What's your case?"

"It's for—for my heart, major——"

"To be used carefully!" said Corentin, after a rapid sounding.

Jean followed behind Cazenave, with his sleeve turned back. Having certified ankylosis and the presence of the callus which caused the shortening, Corentin murmured: "What folly to send us men like that!"

Jean smiled at the severe reflection on Bineff: "What do they worry about it, major! Any one for any sort of job——"

He looked for the smile of understanding on

the other's face, but Corentin snubbed him: "No one asked *your* opinion!"

The infirmary corporal laughed openly. Jean bit his lips—yet another imbecile, swanking because he had a gold stripe! At once he gave up the idea of mentioning the double pleurisy which had put him last year into "temporary suspension." He was sent away. "Fit, fit." And fit all the others were pronounced after him, even Habert the lame-backed man. The major handled his hips and spine, and coldly denied the existence of anything amiss.

The thankless cleaning fatigue kept the squad occupied through the afternoon. Towards three o'clock, Lieutenant Fauvel came to see them. He was a long and merry fellow who seemed all legs and had the face of a comedian. Occupied in the embroidery trade in civil life, he had performed brilliantly in the first months of the war. After a fragment of shell in his back, he was bemedalled, and he had found shelter ever since at Dunkerque, where he had recovered, and he hoped he would never have to leave it.

He had the men introduced to him. Jolly, bantering, and friendly, he questioned them one by one on their callings and the details of their military incarnation. Coming to Jean, at the word "painter" he pricked his ears. "Been through the Beaux-Arts, too? Well, well! We were short of a painter here, a real painter! And you've been to the front, eh? Wounded?"

"At Douaumont, lieutenant."

"Douaumont? Ah, I know it!" said Fauvel. He put on a judicial look. Yes, yes; all those villages of the Meuse got among the big headlines. He, too, had fought there, at the beginning. Not enough had been said about the fights of that time, though quite as terrible as those of today, and even more so perhaps, for in those days one did not know how to protect himself.

Rather impatiently Jean had to put on an appearance of agreement; and Fauvel kept him back when he dismissed the others. A painter! He was fond of such things himself, so they would understand each other. He had made drawings, mind you, since he was a kid. And more,—a member of the Academy, he couldn't remember his name, to whom some friends of his family had shown some of his drawings had voluntarily offered to give him lessons; "and then you know the rest—of course they stuck me into business." He tapped Jean's shoulder: "But I always follow the movement from a distance; I've got artistic taste, mind. You must show me your work."

Jean promised, and keeping his object in sight, sounded his interlocutor on the possibility of a secretarial job. The lieutenant went off at a tangent: "Ah, the captain does as he likes; he has his own ideas and plots. But one might arrange for you to be put on easy fatigues. I'll speak about it to the adjutant."

Jean found Cazenave again, arm in arm with this same adjutant.

"Monsieur Monade, let me introduce you to Darboise, one of my good pals who has just arrived with me."

Jean saluted, and the little Bordelais explained to him: "It's very funny! The adjutant and I are both friends of Robinson's."

"Do you come from down yonder, adjutant?"

"That's my restaurant, next to Lonely Tree Corner."

"Municipal councillor of Sceaux," Cazenave went on.

Certainly Jean had no special regard for officers of that grade; but this one was not offensive, with his well-set fencer's figure, his fine moustache and expressive eyes. He breathed sincerity and good-nature; and pulling out his note-book, he said: "I am the chief marshal of fatigues. We must see if we can fix you with a job not too hard."

"Yes, the lieutenant gave me reason to hope, said Jean, rather thoughtlessly, and the other cut him short: "The lieutenant! Hum! Well then, you're finding out for yourself all about things——"

"There's my arm, too."

"What does your arm matter? You must know that all here are more or less cripples. As long as the major has classed you fit,—I don't say that to frighten you——"

"You couldn't," Cazenave insinuated, "shove him into the coffee fatigue as well?"

"Ah, that's—" the adjutant seemed to hesitate, allowing time for due appreciation of the favour. Then he said: "Very well—the coffee, let it be so. The old hands will grouse. So much the worse for them!"

"We shall be together," said Cazenave, sincerely pleased.

Jean gave thanks. As soon as they were alone the Bordelais said: "A good sort! I shall do what I like with him. Are you trying to work a room in town?"

"I'm going to look for one."

"Don't wait too long. I've already got mine."

"Doesn't one need a permit?"

"They're not given officially; but if Monade shuts his eyes—" Cazenave went on: "There's one in the house where I'm going to stay, very clean; it'd suit you."

The rain was stopping, and a clear sky was emerging from the clouds. Jean went out, free for the time. A hundred yards away the dunes began, a vast sandy country, humped with irregular hillocks, on whose sides were patches of thin grass. A touch of uncleanness was added by great heaps of rubbish. Traffic had traced several paths, all converging from the town towards a squat bastion down there, behind which a forest of masts, the shapes of funnels and cranes, and

often the groaning of sirens, indicated the port, the vigorous heart of the district's activity.

Jean followed one of the tracks, inquisitively, inhaling the briny air. He was so made that a ray of sunshine was enough to lighten his worst anxieties. And now the brilliant orb was sinking above the chestnuts of the plain. His first day was ending in a less irritating outlook. Having climbed on to a bank, he drew his fountain-pen from his pocket and wrote two affectionate letter-cards to Andrée.

Six o'clock had just struck from the church of St. Pol. Jean noticed a procession of workers in fatigue smocks debouching from the foot-bridge and steering for the town. They were his comrades of the morrow, and they filed by at his feet.

There were a hundred of them, dragging their feet in the sand, and raising yellow dust. In broken ranks, by twos, by threes, by sixes, with some stragglers far behind, their column was lamentably stretched and lengthened. What first of all struck one was their shabby appearance. All wore ragged calico overalls, and greasy pouches on their shoulders. All were wan and dirty, with week-old beards, and many faces and hands were blackened with coal-dust. Most striking was their appearance of casual labourers, worn out and dejected. They were not young for the most part; their faces were lined and their gait heavy. They were hurrying, as horses hurry towards the stable even when they are tired out; silently they

passed—on some faces there was an expression of stupidity, on some, passive resignation, on others, fierce malice.

A corporal, with thin neck and hollow cheeks, was in charge. He bestirred himself to cry: "Hey, front ranks! Not so fast!" But these, prodding one another with their elbows, went all the quicker. So he turned to the rear: "Hey, there! Hurry up!" But these were the lame and the grumblers, and they only told him to go and chase himself.

Mechanically Jean got up and followed them. At the entry to the village the corporal tried to stop them and form them in fours. But the leaders set off again before the last had caught up. However, he had to do his part, and he used himself up in calling the step—"One, two, one two!" They ridiculed him, with antics and hustling at the corners. They arrived in front of their quarters, and while the column scattered giggling, he shouted his "Section, halt!"

At that moment exactly, Jean saw a grotesque apparition arise in the doorway of the school. It was a spectacled old man, whose khaki uniform, the cane that he twirled with an important air, his high boots, and the slung map and revolver, vaguely recalled Tartarin. It was the captain!

"By God!" he cried; "Cachin, is that how you bring your men back?"

The corporal, standing at attention, tried to excuse himself: "Captain——"

"Be silent. You will have four days C. B. And I shall keep my eye on you, my fine fellow."

Jean concluded that the moment was not suitable for presenting his note of introduction. He slipped into the crowd and went back into the building where the new arrivals were in an uproar. "Take your seats!" Already they were bringing in steaming broth. He took his place beside a huge fellow with dirty hands.

"You're new?" said his neighbour.

"Yes."

"Ah, you've a lot to sputter about yet, then!" The man went on: "Did you see the corporal? His job's got it for him in the neck! Pity, for he's a good lad!"

Bravely Jean declared: "In that case it wasn't very spicy of you to get him punished."

The other made a ferocious grimace: "Be damned for that, understand. We get even with the first that comes handy!"

CHAPTER II

THE LEAST UGLY JOB

JEAN regretted he had delayed in securing a "home." The fragrance of the name alone thrilled him, for as a fighting soldier he did not know the barrack-room. And what solitude in these surroundings! Until nine o'clock there was the racket of the card-players grouped round the candles, as they violently planted their cards—rotten at the corners—on the tables. Some of the pals were watching the games. Everybody smoked and spat. Only obscene jokes and indecency excited the laughter of the jaded herd. Timidly Darboise suggested having a window half-open, drawing suspicious looks on himself. At ten o'clock, two men came in drunk. Until the middle of the night the stench of that den kept Jean awake and sickened.

What an arising in the pallid dawn! What vexation to put one's bare feet on the cold tiles straight from his crumpled "meat-sack" of dubious cleanliness! "What they have brought me to!" he thought, and envied the soft-jobbers who laze between clean sheets.

He went out to wash in the yard where the "juice"¹ was being distributed. His drinking-cup was leaking, but he accepted a comrade's offer to share his—shivering when the man's smile revealed a toothless mouth.

It was at the entry to the Port, by the gate of the hospital, that Vigouroux, a first-class soldier, mustered the men of the coffee fatigue at ten to six—the sergeant did not get up so early. There Jean met Cazenave again. They had hardly crossed the railway line when, "Keep time!" cried Vigouroux, "we're watched here!"

"By whom?" asked Cazenave in a low voice.

The other bade him be silent, but a little farther on he explained: "At the beginning, each man went on his own to the job. We could work that—it was a bit of all right! Then someone gave the show away. Three months ago the lieutenant-general decided that we must march together through the Port. He's put officers on to watch nothing but that—the brutes! In the evening especially you've got to keep an eye open. Last week a corporal of ours was reduced to the ranks."

"How daft!" said Cazenave, boldly.

"Like all army doings!"

Passing over piers and platforms, they left on their right the great docks that the high tide had just reached. Fine vessels were slumbering along the quaysides. A little way off they perceived an enormous grey building, squat and dreary,

¹ Coffee.—TR.

whose roof was grimy glass. Its front bore an inscription in huge letters—"Dunkerque Chamber of Commerce: Textile Hangar."

The Textile! Jean opened his eyes. This was the Textile, of which his ears had been weary for twenty-four hours. This was where he must live henceforth, and he could not believe it.

A wide space where thousands of barrels were arranged in lines side by side separated them still from the building. This was the place of the wine fatigue. They went forward. In front of the monumental entry, some men of a section were revolving with bent backs a waggon they had brought on to a turn-table. Another team was unloading hay in a dust-laden atmosphere. A long file of trucks was slowly burying itself in the gloom of the interior.

The step was hard to keep on the slippery and uneven pavement, and Cazenave stumbled on a rail. "Keep time!" cried Vigouroux to him with inflexible face.

They halted near the middle of the Textile, in front of the "Office of Staff," a frail building of deal. The old hands took their working places, while Vigouroux introduced the two newcomers to the "roasting" adjutant, Galandrin, who grumbled: "Two more? I didn't ask for any!"

A score of cast-iron globes with glowing fires underneath divided the great transverse bay into fifteen-yard lengths, and filled it with a pungent smell.

"You get hold of that crank and you turn!" said Vigouroux.

"In that smoke?" cried Jean, "why it's enough to choke one!"

"There you are, soldier!" cried the man who was revolving the globe. "I pass the job on to you! Your dad was waiting for you, so that he could idle a bit!"

Darboise was only half pleased with the tone: "Turn and turn about! We shall relieve each other?"

"For sure! There's a nice sort, to believe they want to pile him up!"

"Every half-hour?"

"If necessary!"

Jean sat down to the crank without further remark. At once he found that the work was harder than he would have believed. The mechanism was not oiled, and squeaked. And he had only one arm! At the end of twenty minutes, tired out, he would have liked to turn it over, but his partner Liébal, who had cleared off, turned up only after another long quarter of an hour.

"You're late!"

"Shut your jaw! You've not stuck at it so long!"

Jean was getting nervy, but he controlled himself. In the course of the forenoon Liébal played the trick on him twice more. But not three times, for when his next half-hour was finished, Jean deliberately ceased work. He had stopped only

thirty seconds when Sergeant Depussay, who had come on duty, tapped his shoulders and said: "Do you think you're paid to do nothing?"

"I'm tired."

"Tired! As if it was a hard job!"

"Besides, it's my pal's turn. I've had enough of carrying on for him. He leaves me in the soup every time!"

"Tell him about it at once," said the sergeant. "But, as for that, I'm not so sure about it. There's always squabbling!"

Just then Liébal reappeared: "Ah, you're telling tales, are you?" and taking his place on the stool he hustled Darboise. Jean fired up: "You're asking for a slap in the face!"

"Are you giving it, brat?" The man stood up with a movement of anger and the sergeant intervened: "Do you want me to damn well lock you both up?"

He shuffled off, but suddenly changing his mind he went back to Jean and surprised him by saying: "Anyway, a young man like you, I think it's disgraceful to threaten a man forty-two years old!"

"He provoked me," Jean protested, "because he saw I'd only one good arm!"

"I tell you, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

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Cazenave, whom he caught sight of in the dinner-room, made a grimace: "What a filthy job! Have you anything else in view?"

"Nothing, at the Textile. It's the least ugly job there is here." Jean's self-pity showed in his eyes—"That smoke!"—and he coughed. "That state of things when one has weak lungs!"

The afternoon in its turn dragged itself along, Jean and Liébal taking turns at the crank in hostile silence. Darboise tried to profit by one of his rests to take a walk—"Hey!" the sergeant called him back; "going away's not allowed!"

At six o'clock they mustered again. It was the moment when the Port suddenly disgorged all its toilers. There was reason to envy the civilians who went away peacefully, pipe in mouth, while the army men must resume the lively and regular step of the fighting service. The fatigue leaders, in their responsibility, dreaded the regular officers who rode about on bicycles—resplendent young men who had never been under fire!

They returned across the dunes. Jean had been given an old smock and a rotten bag, and he saw himself as one of those helots whose passing yesterday had depressed him. But the weather was fine; a secret hopefulness trembled inside him. This fagging was an irony of fate that could not last.

And indeed the big sergeant baggage-master on his arrival at the cantonment gave him a letter. From Andrée already? Yes, she had made haste to write to him the very evening of his going. She said she had been thinking things over; why postpone even for a day the steps towards getting him

recalled? Let him, as soon as he arrived, send an urgent note to Chinard, and she herself would go to see him again. Should she go to call on Paulette Dartigues also? Jean felt himself rather humiliated at the thought of the modest woman approaching an adventuress in the part of a beggar; and so much self-denial, in her so proud, touched him.

Andrée added some counsel of a practical sort. Let him wheedle his superiors—his captain to whom he had an introduction. He must be on good terms with the surgeon; that also was essential. And in that treacherous climate he must take care, and watch himself closely. If he could procure a room! And when he had been perspiring, he must be sure to change!

Having read it again, Jean put it tenderly in his pocket. He went to the Bureau. Percevain the clerk, to whom he told his desire, looked at him suspiciously: "The captain himself?"

"Certainly; I have a note for him."

Having exchanged a sly smile with the chief, the other showed him into the adjoining room, where Papa Meunier, in his shirt-sleeves, was playing cup and ball: "Thirty-five," he counted, breathlessly, "thirty-six." Seated in a corner, Fauvel made Jean a gesture of disapprobation. The captain missed his throw, and turned in vexation to the intruder: "Damnation!" he cried, "what does he want again, that owl there?"

Darboise handed him Mascard's letter without

a word. Meunier, having run through it at a glance, exclaimed: "No! The same as for Prestrot! All the lot, then? He recommends them all to me! Funny man, that Captain Mascard—and he doesn't know me!"

He went up to Jean, put his hand on his shoulder, and fixed on him his big eyes, gleaming behind their thick glasses: "I must speak to you harshly. I am a hard man in the service—very hard. Ask your comrades—about the days of imprisonment they get! But I am just. We are here a company of workers. What the devil! we are here to work."

Adjusting his glasses, he read his colleague's letter again. Secretly Jean was rejoicing in this ready-made model for sketches to send to the comic papers.

"A painter—ah, ah!" Meunier went on; "that's sure to be of advantage to you. What fatigue are you in?" And without waiting for the reply: "Hum! We've already had here some very stylish little gentlemen. A consul of France, look you, vice-consul at Constantinople. A mere private, and he had to drudge like the rest. And then, too, a Master of Arts, or a Fellow—I don't know what not! That one thought it beneath him to pare potatoes. They wrote to me from the Ministry about him. Ah, ah! Eight days in the guard-room, I chucked him! Quite so! A man is master in his own house. I got rid of him. I tell you all this to show you, my good

fellow, that recommendations, where I'm concerned—pooh!”

Jean was enlightened and regretted his overtures. Dismissed, he withdrew. The lieutenant overtook him on the landing: “Unskilful, that, sonny! What the devil! why didn't you speak to me about it? Now that the old man knows you, he'll pick a quarrel with you, mind that!”

At the bottom, Jean butted into Cazenave, who informed him gleefully: “I've done it, it's granted. I'm going tomorrow morning to the inspection.”

“I'd like to as well.”

“Ah, but Habert and Prestrot said they would get themselves put down for it. All the lot—I'm afraid that would have a bad effect.”

The adjutant joined them, and Jean asked his advice. Monade was explicit: “No, come now, they're three already. Try and wait a day or two.”

Jean assented—the good nature of the adjutant had overcome him. While Cazenave was insisting that a room must be hired for him beside his own, the adjutant declared:

“Now then! Darboise is a steady lad—I believe *I've* got the spot for him—Rue de la République.”

Kindly he offered to take Jean there. It was at Mademoiselle Vandenbücke's, a lady already mature; strong, affected, and pockmarked. There was nothing enticing about the place—a little

room whose only daylight came from a window into the kitchen. But Jean saw that his hand was forced; and for the little time he would spend there, anyway——!

CHAPTER III

JEAN STILL HOPEFUL

EIGHT days went by, and Jean's lot had bettered a little. Though less favoured than Cazenave, who had achieved his ends and now occupied one of the orderly posts, yet Monade had granted his petition and changed his job. He escaped to the "bakery." Allotted to the potatoes, a fatigue also under the control of Sergeant Depussay—who consented to the transfer only with the worst of grace—this privileged circle did not receive him without coolness. But exerting himself to dissipate the slight hostility of the atmosphere, he was already succeeding.

Privileged circle? Do not consider too agreeable a job which consisted of sorting, paring, and cutting out with the point of a knife the bad spots from the half-rotten tubers that came in truck-loads.

At first Jean was surprised; where could such potatoes come from and why were they spoiled? They poked fun at him. Decante coldly assured him that the whole of the imported crop had to spend, according to specified conditions, three full months in the rain on the quays at Rouen.

This Decante was a fair youth, bland at the outset; more than deferential—almost servile—in his relations with the chiefs. In private he showed himself of bitter and cynical mind, and sometimes of disturbing violence. Formerly a plate-layer, dismissed for Anarchist propaganda, he declared that he was often obliged to mask himself, and prided himself equally on wearing it well and on dropping it at will. A ready speaker, he enjoyed a certain amount of influence. He made overtures to Jean. Seated side by side, they chatted, and soon they sympathised. Decante had come quickly to appreciate the intellectual boldness of this young townsman. Jean relished the other's witticisms, and was swiftly led on to perilous ground. What could one think of the state of things in Europe after two years of exhausting struggle? Together they scoffed at the made-to-order operatics of the newspapers, the fallacious optimism of official pronouncements. Decante led him still further. Where were the objects of peace? Did they not recede every day? Carry on? If they were sure of a crushing victory, by all means! But such was not the case, and think of the price of each additional week! He compared the two sides to a couple of losing gamblers, facing each other at the gaming-table, and who persistently continue, dreaming of impossible retrievings, without seeing that it is the "bank" that gets rich at their expense. All such cynical opinions Decante was careful to utter only

as whimsical fancies. Jean, too, discussed them in a light-hearted way, with no rebellion against them. He was far from swallowing them whole, for he confidently believed at that time that victory was certain, and nearer perhaps than one thought.

In his new vocation, what most disgusted Darboise was the fetid smell of all the mouldiness in the midst of which they worked, and the shiny pulp that stuck to their hands—those elegant hands with carefully tended nails, of which he had once been so proud! He was aiming at recruiting some friends. His candid and sprightly nature and his studio jokes were not long in making him one of the leaders of the party. By his mimicry and foolery he sometimes aroused such laughter that Decante got anxious about it: "Mind Depussay doesn't get a mark on you!"

The sergeant often prowled in their vicinity. He was hated for his harshness, his pitiless severity, that he tried to disguise under an assumption of good-nature. Darboise used to imitate him amusingly, his lameness—that service life seemed to accentuate—and his trick of wrinkling his forehead. Did Depussay get wind of this? One day he approached Darboise: "I am sorry, but I've been obliged to notice that you, and two of your comrades, have got too much time on your hands!"

Fortunately the incident had no sequel, and Jean's heedless disposition soon enabled him to get over it.

It must be admitted that what helped to keep him in a good temper was his renewed confidence that his exile was not to become permanent.

To begin with, Chinard had sent him a cordial note of assurance that he was looking after his interests. Andrée had then been to call on Paulette Dartigues, who had received her at "Astoria" in the nurse's uniform which she put on for two hours every day. A warm letter soon followed. Letourneur had a favourable recollection of Jean's two drawings that once appeared in the *Quotidien*. In great friendliness Chinard urged Jean to send him, as soon as possible, a series of sketches made "down there."

Jean was delighted. He saw himself launched in his turn by the great journal. And he almost congratulated himself on the chance that had brought him for some weeks to Dunkerque, where in truth many new founts of inspiration offered.

Though he had no aversion to "grand compositions," it was to limited subjects that his tastes turned for the moment, a "genre" somewhat discredited, thanks to an excess of bad work, but one in which his master Claude Boucheron and others, under the necessity of earning their living, had achieved masterpieces of vigour and moderation. Subjects? That swarming panorama of the Port, its postures and incidents, all that he came upon in the course of his strolls along the docks—all this grouped itself in his head in daring compositions, and their titles offered themselves volunta-

rily. The time to do it? At first he could encroach on the hour and a half set apart for dinner. With the last mouthful swallowed, he slipped away and sat apart, on sacks of rice or hay. In his sketch-book he dashed off brief impressions—some feature or gesture, the secret of some line of movement; sometimes the automatic gait of poor wretches literally transformed into beasts of burden; sometimes the formal dignity with which British dockers performed the most menial tasks; and the surprising comicality of several townsmen who strayed among the mob—Geoffroy, of the Crédit Lyonnais, who, before getting hold of a chest, would always make the gesture of rolling back his sleeves; Rondel, formerly proprietor of the famous "Green Pavilion," now drawing figure 8's on the ground with an old petrol-tin full of water.

Jean kept his work quiet. To Decante alone he consented to show some of his sketches. Decante's considered and cautious praise charmed him: "Not bad—but you don't see all!"

He offered to pilot him, to show him corners—and "snouts," as he said—rich in suggestions. They went about together, absenting themselves under the excuse of their personal work, among the twenty different activities of the Textile and the yards that were scattered along the endless quays. Jean was charmed to see his initiation completed. Everywhere he saw exhausting labour. Everywhere his companion indicated and emphasised the brutality of the chiefs, the stupefaction of

those under them, declaring firmly that there were two principal sorts of face—the brute and the brutalised. From afar Jean enjoyed noting down the shrunken face of Dubus, the adjutant of the “minor victuals,” who unhooked his pipe from his teeth only to insult his inferiors; the paunch of Carouge, ex-sergeant-major, promoted for his incapacity as administrative officer, who strutted about, a pretentious nonentity. And the faces of the poor downtrodden devils of the “bakery” only here revealed to him their hopeless expression of destitute bestiality. Nearly all of them auxiliaries, were they then malingerers or mutilated?—Beslay, with his square chin and the goitrous neck like a cow’s; Gougis’s monkey-like profile; little Couvray, whose distorted features seemed to overlap. Jean’s pencil embittered itself in transcribing so much ugliness, so much human degradation.

Decante congratulated him: “Severely powerful, your latest drawings!”

Jean felt himself on the way to achievement, but he wanted responsible approval. He decided to send some of his best sketches to Claude Boucheron. Encouragements did not delay. “Bravo, my boy!” wrote the master, “the best work you’ve done!”

Henceforth sure that he was in no way deluded, for fifteen days running he shut himself up to put the finishing touches to the series.

But what unexpected difficulties he had to contend with! Mademoiselle Vandenbücke sud-

denly manifested such a return of coquettishness that he no longer questioned her age! She assumed pink blouses and showy trinkets. She never left the bright kitchen upon which their two rooms opened. Evening and morning she lingered there in suggestive *déshabillé*, with her hair—which was beautiful—loose upon her stout shoulders. She even made excuse to enter her lodger's room: "Still at work, Monsieur Jean!"

One evening, having seated herself, she related all her life to him. She was the daughter of the butcher who was formerly in the main street, and she had money, and two houses at Malo, let by the year. And she found it dull—solitude pained her.

Jean could hardly believe his ears. Had she taken it into her head to marry? He produced for her the photos of his wife and their little one, and compelled her to admire them. It was an obvious blow for her! Then it went too far. He kept Andrée's letters locked up in a drawer, and noticed one fine day that they had been meddled with in his absence—the bundle was disarranged! Anger seized him at the thought of their endearments profaned. The same evening he gave notice—it was just the end of the month.

Decante found a place for him—a bedroom and a fine kitchen on a ground floor. Its only inconvenience was in being rather far from the school, but he would have comparative comfort and absolute quiet. The proprietress, Madame Trou-

selier, an aged widow, lived on the first floor with her daughter-in-law, whose husband was at the front. The two women made no noise. Jean was there nearly a week without even seeing them. Then one evening he met the young woman—slender, dainty, reserved—coming in with a little carriage and two babies, of whose existence even he had had no suspicion till then.

Darboise would have been delighted with his new home if Monade had not seemed to take the matter the wrong way: "I told that lady that I was bringing her a lodger for the duration of the war."

Jean refused to believe that Monade would not come round. Meeting him again a few days later he sounded him. From the first Monade had offered, if Jean should ever think of sending for his wife, to introduce him to Lavigne, the sergeant appointed to the railway station and the good genius of fond couples. Without withdrawing, and even less encouragingly, the adjutant said: "Well, you know—that it's becoming more and more difficult."

"Come now—seeing the lieutenant's had his here for three days now!" Jean was working Decante's tip. Monade seemed embarrassed: "Very well; I'll see. I'll find out. But you know—there's talk of an order that everybody must sleep at quarters."

Bah! Jean saw everything in bright colours. As his own return could not be regarded as im-

mediate, although it was coming nearer, it was Andrée who conveyed to him, in a letter which arrived the same morning, her inmost and fervent desire. It flattered and affected him deliciously—that modest confession into which she had slipped, so far from him; that acknowledged need of him, were it only for a few short days, that she might gather strength and happiness again.

CHAPTER IV

JEAN'S COMRADES

SEVERAL days went by, which he passed in cheerful vein. The series of drawings was ending to his artistic satisfaction. May was coming in, with a gentle warmth that would have hallowed heaven itself. Above all, his cherished plan was hastening to realization.

As Dunkerque was in the proscribed area, the only difficulty related to Andrée's journey. Now, Lavigne was at the passport office, and Darboise had no need of Monade. It was Cazenave who got him an introduction to the sergeant, a big fellow with a gentle eye and a nose comically arched, who put himself at Jean's disposition for the date which he might select.

Jean wrote triumphantly to Andrée, proposing a day in the following week. It would be better, she replied, to wait till the end of the month, when her mother would be willing to bring the baby to Sceaux. That was a little trick on him. He felt bitter towards his mother-in-law for thus postponing their reunion.

A worthy woman, Madame Sartiagues! Jean

maintained a polite but rather indifferent attitude towards her, mistrusting the bourgeois spirit that spoke in her eyes. And what a surprise then it was to receive an eight-page letter from her the next day! Her daughter had told her of their plan, which she found herself obliged to oppose. She was addressing herself directly to her son-in-law, as the more sensible. The proposed journey was madness! Had Jean thought of the danger?

The danger? Jean acknowledged that he could not absolutely deny it. Since his arrival at St. Pol, no week had gone by without a visit from the Taubes either by day or by night. At night, warned by the roaring siren at the spinning-mill they would go down into the cellars. By day—well, more often than not they went to the windows, and watched the flight of the big grey birds among the clouds and the bursting shrapnel. Once only had bombs been dropped, with a result of several victims.

Danger? Darboise hesitated. A letter from his wife arrived. Andrée begged him not to mind her mother's letter—there had been almost a scene between them about the matter. Was she not the free mistress of her own actions? On this occasion, she was very determined.

Jean understood and agreed. Yes, their love must come first of all, and the danger should not be exaggerated!

Andrée also repeated her advice of some days before—to go and call on their cousins the d'Esti-

gnards at Malo, who she imagined might be useful on occasion, since they had lived there for twenty years. Jean undertook to present himself at Primrose Villa.

M. d'Estignard was a tall elderly man, whose white whiskers, regular, sly features, and skull-cap gave him the important air of the old-time law-court judge that in fact he was. His wife—sprightly and slender, with the becoming coiffure of another century—charmed one by her animation and courteous refinement. And the darling of the house was the young daughter Sylvaine. When Jean saw her he rose in astonishment. For her stature, her eyes, even to the delicate poise of her head—he could not help saying: “I thought it was my wife!”

That made merriment, and the young girl declared laughingly: “People have often told me that I resembled my cousin—and I want so much to know her!”

Darboise, promptly and confidentially, replied: “Ah, you will not have to wait long.”

He told them a little of his hopes. And his hosts were delighted: “Sylvaine has been so lonely since the war,” said Madame d'Estignard, her looks caressing the young girl.

Tea was served, and the conversation took a most friendly course. They talked about music. Sylvaine, according to her mother, had an excellent and well-trained voice, but she had no one to accompany her on the piano. Jean lingered, de-

lighted with the domestic heartiness. The talk having turned on the disaster of the times, the d'Estignards displayed a humane and lofty attitude of mind that disarmed irony. Patriots and Catholics, confident of victory, ready to accept anything for its sake, they did not blush to regret the horror of the long sacrifice. They were French, and they were paying their debts to France! Their son Marcel, an auxiliary surgeon, had seen painful things in the Argonne.

"Where is he, just now?"

"Near Roye."

With Auguères, Jean thought. Ingenuously, his eyes always returned to the young girl. When the war was mentioned, the innocent face seemed to be veiled with a secret sorrow, and in the tragic moments of parting Jean could again see in it the face of his beloved. Compassionately he thought, "Poor little girl, has *she* got some one over there?"

He left them with the promise that he would soon come again. A week, a fortnight went by, and he had not made an opportunity. It was not that the time was lacking. His fatigue party even enjoyed several successive days of rest. He had just packed up his drawings and addressed them to Chinard. No, there was no real excuse, except that he was yielding to the lure of spring, to the desire to drink deeply of that air of May which in February he had doubted if he would be there to enjoy.

The town had little attraction for him. He had

to go there in order to secure an official permit, but in cutting through it he had hardly stayed long anywhere except in front of the church of St. Jean, which was half destroyed by fire, heart-rending to see, its windows broken, its buttresses hopeless of anything to support. As for the Port, he intended to know it. One day he extended his walk to the lighthouse, and farther still, to the end of the huge jetty which extends out into the open sea. But it was of country excursions that he was, as always, most fond. Several times he borrowed Cazenave's bicycle, which had been sent to him. Then he had the physical satisfaction of pedalling without fatigue along the fine level roads. Rosendaël, Malo—small towns of holiday resort, but deserted and mournful now in their congealed coquetry; busy Coudekerque-Branche; Bourbourg, on the marge of its canal; Petite-Synthe the moss-grown; Grande-Synthe, Mardyck, and farther still, Loon-Plage with its endless sands. He explored all, light-hearted, content in the strength of his legs. There was nothing in all this to compare with his wonderful Provence; but his emancipated spirit, more at liberty to dream only of Andrée, ran, leaping, to meet his approaching happiness.

Of a sociable nature, Jean wished he could have found a friend during this period of waiting—if only to talk about Her! If he could have had Templier or Boussac—dear, departed confidants! Or Auguères! He wrote to the latter, who re-

plied from the Oise, where preparations for the offensive were engrossing his whole attention.

To whom could he turn? The level of those around him was a low one—peasants and workmen who saw nothing beyond their “booze and bacca”; and in the coffee fatigue, a few wrongheaded grumblers, like Liébal, and Nouvion, the former wrestler, from the African punishment battalion, before whom the whole company trembled; and the cooper Lauguenac, pink and blooming, with a bullet in his knee, the incorrigible idler and past-master of “go easy.” Companions for him? No. He could not count on Decante. He disappeared at the very beginning of dinner, and one knew that he had a little “establishment” in town. (A frequent happening. Thus it was that Saumade acted as landlord, installed in a tavern whose landlady had lost her husband in the war; the evil of it being that he also had a wife, living at Pantin, whom he was glad to go to see every three months, when on leave.)

Nothing to rely on, either, among the middle-class men—Rondel the restaurant-keeper, Geoffroy of the Crédit Lyonnais; to whom were added Fluzin, afflicted with a hideous wen, but nephew of a former Minister, and assigned by that qualification to the “sanitary fatigue,” in which one took things easy; and Giraud, a bearded chap of pensive physiognomy that one would have taken for a country teacher sooner than a grocer of the Rue Marais, Paris. The antiquity of their

association with the detachment qualified all four to take their meals at the non-coms.' mess, as well as instructor Percevain and the assistant baggage-master Hirschfeld, a pale and elegant young man who was believed to take cocaine. The mess! The question had indeed been raised of making room also for Cazenave and Darboise. Monade urged it. Depussay, commanding the mess, had formally opposed it.

Jean regretted that he had no stripe. At St. Pol, the sole duty of the non-coms. was to lead their fatigue parties to the Port—and several excused themselves from that. Thereafter, and generally speaking, their time was their own. Truth to say, Darboise wondered if even in that communion he would have found what he was looking for. After each meal the company remained shut up in the room set apart for them, played cards, drank, shouted, and ground music-hall jingles out of the piano.

Jean appreciated his corporals in the service, though most of them were rustic dullards. There was Muret, who could hardly read or write; Volbold, a big-mouthed man who was afflicted with a chronic loss of voice, and who smelt of wine at three paces. There was Cachin, too, he whom he had seen in trouble that first day,—a “good little lad” it was agreed, who often intervened at the “bakery” on behalf of his men. On that account he had got into the clutches of the Department non-coms., and become the captain's pet

aversion, so that his only remaining ambition was centred on the suspension list, for which his heart-disease, aggravated by tobacco and night-watches, made him a strong competitor.

With the sergeants, too,—except Depussay—Jean had only distant relations. Bousquet, a mere nobody, he understood better now; he could only have made him those advances at F—— and on the railway journey to relieve his own boredom, for since their arrival he pretended not to know him. Who was there beside? The rotund baggage-master, who went woman-hunting with Monade; Dulac, a shallow personage with the elegance of a hairdresser's assistant, and commander of the "sanitary fatigue"; Gandolphe, who came from Class '17, squat, short-sighted, of vulgar appearance; Richard, the canteen-keeper of St. Cloud, a red-faced mischief-maker. There was no need to study them deeply; they all oozed mediocrity.

After all this weeding-out, Jean fell back on Cazenave. What had he against that man? The little Bordelais was obliging, and lent him his bicycle. He had undertaken, in case of air-raid warning, to run to the Rue Jeanne d'Arc and tell him. Well posted in everything, by reason of his occupation, he gave Jean the tips. His dealings were all satisfactory, in sum. Often he would sound Jean: "Will you come for a stroll? What are you doing tomorrow? Come and have a cup of tea at my show!"

Jean always declined. But this evening, he agreed to take a turn with him.

They wandered through the streets of St. Pol, which swarmed at that hour, and chatted. Darboise tested the ground, with a view to closer friendship between them. It was a speedy disillusionment, so few were the things they had in common! One after another he tried several subjects that Cazenave failed to respond to. As for himself, the babble of his companion left him heedless. Moreover, winks and smiles were passing between him and the girls of the spinning-mill; and it irritated Jean prodigiously. He must be left to his intrigues! At an early hour Jean suggested going in.

Evening was falling as they returned, and the moon had not long risen. Suddenly the siren's shriek made the passers-by come to a standstill around them: "What's that?"

The harsh call ceased for a 'second, and was repeated once, twice—people lifted their faces; a Taube? "Wait,—four, five——"

The series of blasts was extended to eight. Then there was a scurry among the promenaders—"a Zeppelin!"

The street emptied itself. A Zeppelin! In the distance one could make out the drone of a powerful engine. Explosions followed; the guns in the square were firing!

Jean gazed up at the sky. Cazenave seized him by the arm: "What—what shall we do?"

"That's what I'm wondering."

"Where can we go?" The little Bordelais was trembling on his legs. This sign of fright, instead of irritating Darboise, moved him to pity, he who felt himself to have been steeped in the crucible of ordeal.

The siren had taken breath, and its mournful voice arose once more. They were still on the pavement. "Come, come along," Cazenave repeated, and tried to pull Jean along, for he lacked the strength to escape by himself.

"Where to?"

"To a cellar—come!"

Jean remembered that bombs with time-fuses dropped from the dirigibles usually burst right in the foundations: "Follow me!"

He began to run, and in full control of himself, guided the other and supported him by the arm when he nearly fell. In less than a minute they had gained the dunes. Jean remembered the trenches cut there and jumping into the long hollow, he said merrily: "Do you think we shall be badly off here?"

"Oh, there—look!"

Towards the horizon they could dimly see a grey shape, an oblong phantom that glided through the sky. Almost at the same moment, the shafts of searchlights swept through the emptiness. The long pencilled rays crossed each other and broke away again in doubt. Suddenly they caught the monster's hull as the leviathan in

metal floated along, its under side brilliant, its top like dull silver under the moon.

"How beautiful it is!" Jean murmured, in an artist's enjoyment of the vision.

With an interval of a few seconds, there came two explosions of falling bombs, the second one nearer. The Zeppelin was rushing straight over St. Pol. Cazenave seized Jean by the neck and threw himself on his knees so as to force him to crouch. Boom! They were shaken and stunned. A third fearful explosion set the air trembling. That one was in the town, without doubt! "Mother!" cried Cazenave.

Together they threw themselves flat. But Jean's eye did not leave the monster that was passing exactly over their heads. A few seconds went by—the Zeppelin was escaping towards the east.

"Well?" said Jean gently.

As Cazenave did not stir, he called him again. The other then half stood up, and forcing a weak smile, said: "Don't damn well laugh at me!"

Jean's heart went out in pity for so much weakness detected. "Don't be afraid, it's over my lad!" and he caressed the other's cheek.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

DAILY PROMENADES

As Darboise returned from his work in the evening, Cazenave said to him, "Let's hurry over the grub, eh?"

Obliged to take his meals at the mess, if only for economical reasons, Jean ate without appetite between two gluttonous neighbours, of whom one, Chevillard, cleaned his mess-tin for him for a penny a day. Jean was one of the first to rise from the table, but Cazenave was waiting for him already: "Come as you are!"

"Never!" The other went with him to the Rue Jeanne d'Arc, where Darboise in a twinkling washed and brushed himself, and exchanged his working-jacket for the horizon-blue tunic made at F—— before his departure.

It was the hour when the town filled up with humming life. The saw-mill and the spinning-mill were releasing their hundreds of working-girls, and Cazenave's eyes glistened.

Nothing amused Jean so much as the manœuvres

of the little Bordelais. He knew the truth about the relaxed morals among this feminine population. What surroundings for a philanderer! He himself, on those rare occasions when he went to work among the dunes, had had some lively encounters. Cazenave must be enjoying himself! How often Jean had surprised him joking with girls who were not the least bit timid, or again, strolling in Monade's company, who exercised the fascination of his bright sheepish eyes and curled moustache.

What astonishment it was to receive confidences from Cazenave in the first days of their new friendship! He was disappointed, bitterly disappointed. He had even come to regret having left F——, where he had such a good time! Exceedingly annoying, these girls here! Certainly, they "carried on" willingly,—not at all shy, by Gad!—and they gave the "glad eye" in response to winks, and to the most pointed of remarks answers of the same sort. They would even make appointments, but they always came in twos.

Jean laughed at him: "It's serious, then, is it, eh?"

Oh, no! It was because he had scored a blank! There were two or three, Cazenave confessed, with whom he reckoned it would finish up all right. But after a week at the game, they would solemnly ask him if his "intentions" were marriage?

"It's disparaging to oneself, you understand!" Cazenave added: "I was wrong. The first ones

I chaffed, I had the bad luck to let them know I hadn't been—to the front. Ever since, they poke fun at me about it—all of them, and tell me a lot of rot about their brother, or their best boy, or their fiancé; and even if he's been killed, they wouldn't half replace him with a shirker, by what they say!"

He finished, and looking at Jean, said: "Ah, I ought to have the trump cards that you've got!"

One evening he confided to Jean: "They've seen us strolling together, and they've asked me questions. I believe you've taken Marguerite's fancy."

"What Marguerite?"

"The big red-haired girl that I pointed out to you the other night, the one you said——"

"She was pretty, yes." Darboise ended by becoming partial to their daily promenades. He now more quickly finished off his meal and his toilet, so that seven o'clock should find him at the spinning-mill.

A few minutes after the siren had uttered its harsh gasp, the first of the work-girls hurried through the gates—open at last. How quickly they sped! One divined in their haste something like resentment for a beautiful day wasted, and hope for revenge on destiny.

Yet, poor girls, no longer were their lovers waiting for them, they on whose arms they once used to walk away in foolish and palpitating laughter! Alas for the male generation, carried off and

buried in the trenches yonder, mangled by machine-guns—perhaps at that minute, and so many of them rotting for months past in unknown holes! Alas for the young women, too soon widowed! Some of them were mating again with the helmeted comrades so rarely seen—exempted or suspended, weakly cavaliers who brought with them little honour! Others, defying the gossips, consented to be paraded along the canal by zouaves, in their conquering Algerian head-dress. These were billeted in the villas opposite, where their good friends rejoined them from the 111th or the 29th. But these intrigues did not attract attention like the beautiful intimacies of yore, and they were regarded with less favour by the mothers, who rightly feared the soldier as an exile who was eager for the pleasure that had no morrow.

CHAPTER II

TWO GOOD-LOOKING GIRLS

FOR the third time, now, our friends met the two good-looking girls. Cazenave, much excited, whispered, "I tell you, it's coming off!"

They had turned right-about-face. So had the girls, who smiled frankly upon them at the resultant meeting. Jean remarked aloud: "There go some young ladies in merry mood!"

"Because they've got good consciences!" They slowed down, as though inviting the others to follow. They let themselves be overtaken, and on the bank of the canal, the conversation was continued.

Jean found himself pushed to the front. His spirit and gift of the gab worked wonders. But he was not flirting on his own account, and thought only of helping Cazenave; yet here he was obliterating the other and making him appear an outsider. Darboise realised it, turned round, and made himself small in the presence of his friend, whom he represented with comical earnestness as being desperately "smitten."

"And you—you're not?" the red-haired girl said daringly.

“Ah, excuse me, I’m married, while this young bachelor——”

He voluntarily eclipsed himself behind Cazenave, whom he even provided with the means of shining. The latter made some funny rejoinders which scored in their turn. Jean, with his hands behind his back, assumed an air of indifference.

“Monsieur is dreaming?” the fair girl asked.

The red-haired one insisted—“Of whom?”

They teased him for a minute; then the Bordelais resumed the game; and then it was the girls who proceeded to desired confidences.

They declared themselves above the St. Pol average in training and schooling. They were the daughters, mark you, of a tax-collector of the Maubeuge district, and had heard nothing of their parents since the beginning of the war. They lived here with an aunt, and they saw no one, and they were bored to extinction. They complained crossly of the evil tongues of their neighbours.

Cazenave was playing the lady-killer. Jean, again silent, was watching the trio out of the corner of his eye. Agreeable girls, those two! The red-haired one, especially, displayed admirable lines. Her proportions were worthy of the antique! What a goddess she might have posed for—yes, the Diana for which Delard had hunted a model so long!

They lingered. Henriette, the blonde, looking at her wrist-watch, suddenly exclaimed: “Ten o’clock! Whatever will aunt say?”

"Bah! You're independent enough!"

"Certainly."

"Shall we take you home?"

"No, thanks; there are too many idle tongues."

The girls cut the farewells short, and disappeared quickly in the darkness, as they followed the tow-path.

"Well, what do you say about them? Are they approved?" Cazenave asked in open-hearted glee.

Jean said nothing—surprised and troubled as he recalled the hot pressure of the red-haired girl's hand. During the last quarter of an hour she had not spoken a word to him.

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A strong rumour was running, confirming Monade's warning, that permits to sleep in town would presently be cancelled. But Darboise flattered himself that he could come to terms with heaven itself. The adjutant was giving him the cold shoulder. On the other hand, he was making progress in Fauvel's graces. The lieutenant had several times invited him to "chat about art." He had taken him home, had offered him a liqueur brandy—what a surprise!—had read some of his verses to him—Oh, what verses! He had even asked his advice in the matter of a poker-work panel, and made himself ridiculous by not adding that it was his wife's work.

Protected in that direction, Jean went to see Lavigne again at the station. The sergeant,

faithful to his promise, made out for him (and tranquilly stamped with his captain's signature) a permit in the name of Madame Darboise, "commercial traveller."

Kindness itself, this good Lavigne! But a certain wildness in his manner surprised Jean. Cazenave, questioned on the matter, shook his head: "Ah, you noticed it! Yes, it can be seen. Poor lad!"

Though of very good family, the son of a substantial manufacturer in the neighbourhood of Baume-les-Dames, the sergeant had been unlucky of late years;—enormous losses on the Stock Exchange, his wife's elopement with a dentist, and the war on top of all. He was drinking now, to forget his troubles; he was becoming besotted. Those who had seen him when he first came there said that the change in him in a year was frightful.

"A pity, eh?"

But the essential thing for Jean was the precious permit, available for a fortnight, which he had just posted with a long letter that would surely decide Andrée to set off within three days.

During those seventy-two hours, Darboise lived in impassioned agitation. He was only waiting now for a telegram. Ah, his sweetheart!—He kept himself apart, that he might gaze upon her photograph.

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It was a shock, that card that came from Andrée

on the fourth day to tell him that the baby had just got whooping-cough! And badly, too—such coughing-fits to quell! The doctor, without wishing to alarm her, did not conceal that the matter must be closely watched, in view of the always possible complication of pneumonia. It was out of the question that she could leave Paris for some time.

Jean, as he turned the page over and turned it again, repeated to himself aloud, "What damned luck!" He could not but approve his wife's decision, but he had an intuition or presentiment of a nameless danger.

Come, now! He must be patient, since he could not help it! What was four or five weeks? At first he sought nepenthe in his work. But in vain; he had neither desire nor success. So he would let off the steam physically,—this was the time to borrow Cazenave's bicycle and go for long, wild rides. But the periods of "rest" had become rarer. Every evening he found himself full of pent-up energy.

CHAPTER III

OLD LOVE LETTERS

It was impossible, without offending Cazenave, to shun for long these evening strolls that had become customary. Jean found himself obliged to return to the canal path to greet the two amiable sisters—a rendezvous which had many morrows.

Marguerite, the red-haired one, visibly seized by amorous infatuation and piqued by Jean's smiling coldness towards her, gave up her reserve, in spite of herself, sometimes sighing aloud for any who would condescend to understand, and sometimes showing special favour to Cazenave by way of exciting his friend's jealousy. Her instinct, too, taught her that men are led by their vanity. She started encouraging Darboise to talk about his campaigns, and the Bordelais had to listen to him telling the story of Nanteuil or Douaumont, while the entranced sisters flattered him with languishing looks. "How you have suffered!" Henriette exclaimed.

The other girl showed herself every evening readier to accord him the hero's reward. Sometimes suddenly familiar, she poked gentle fun at

the significance of his cap, then pretended to take it away from him. He would prevent her laughing, and this meant a short struggle face to face, holding each other tightly by the wrist. Again, she would break without reason into the middle of his stories and clap her hand suddenly over his mouth, and the touch of his warm lips and silken moustache sufficed to set her trembling.

"I tell you, she's dotty on you!" Cazenave whispered to his friend.

"Nonsense!"—Jean affected innocence or scepticism. He was annoyed, one evening when all four were returning, to meet the adjutant, and especially when the latter said to him next day, jovially, "There are some gentlemen who don't find things dull!"

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"Hey! One for you, sonny!"

From the platform of a staggering tramcar, the big baggage-master held a letter out to Jean. He took it, and at once recognized Andrée's writing. He opened it slowly. He remembered his emotion, once upon a time, at the first letters from Andrée! He began to read it, and already certain that it was all up with the contemplated act of baseness, for that evening at least, a weight was lifted from him.

Dear sweetheart! The long letter was full of modest and intimate details, perfumed with trustfulness and infinite tenderness. Andrée went

over her day again for him. She had not gone out, and had spent hours by the little invalid. The doctor had been, and was more reassuring. Left alone in the afternoon, while her mother had gone into town, she had found, while she was tidying things, the letters he had written her when they were engaged, letters tied up with a pink ribbon, at the bottom of a drawer. Cards and letters, she had read them all again, one by one, and then reread them. How quickly the afternoon had gone! She had only interrupted her reading to give a glance, or medicine, to the little one who was playing on the bed; and when the letters were finished—did he guess what she did?—well, she had looked up in their turn the letters he had sent her since the war, during their three periods of separation. What delight to notice their still more entrancing tone! And especially those of the last few weeks, in their impassioned vehemence!

As he read the lines, Jean felt tears rising to his eyes. A picture arose also to his mind; the well-loved woman, the chosen one, by the bedside of the child created in their divine image, expressing for him in the lamplight the chosen outpourings of his heart.

He breathed the air in childish relief. Five weeks were a negligible delay in view of their gorgeous crowning. Swarms of loving words that he could cast into a letter whirled in his head like birds.

CHAPTER IV

AN AIR RAID

JEAN had kept his word to himself. During the day he had written two long letters to Andrée, and then slipped away on the bicycle after dinner. Having returned, he was resting his elbows on the sill of his window, opened wide upon the orchards.

It was the time for meditation, before complete repose. To disturb the silence, there remained only the laughter of children, scattering in the distance. Night was approaching in serenity, profound and wonderful. There was not a cloud, and stars were twinkling in the transparent abyss; while yonder, just over the Port, a big moon appeared, red as a foggy sun, behind the unwelcome outlines of chimneys and cranes. It rose rapidly, and was soon pouring its opal light on the slated roofs of the lower buildings. Jean lingered; a breeze was stirring his hair and gently cooling him after his ride. He breathed freely. Fruit was filling the air with a faint sweet scent, in hopes of maturity, and the warmth was slumberous. He felt himself transported to his blessed motherland in the South.

He started at the familiar sound of an explosion, followed by silence. Was it an illusion? He waited, quite ready to laugh at himself. Suddenly there was another, already near—one it was impossible not to recognise! A bomb! And a light had burst high over a group of houses. He strained his ears—engines were humming in the sky.

He thought wildly of going out; but his heart shrank when a mournful wail came to him from Dunkerque. That, one knew at once, was the big fog-siren—in the country they called it “the cow”; and promptly, that of the spinning-mill roared out thrice. It had not finished when it was echoed in the distance by the sharp whistle of Coudekerque-Branche, and the rising scream of La Tour—a fierce affecting concert of tocsin voices in the night.

The thought of Andrée had just flashed into Jean’s mind—he would take shelter, for her sake. But some one knocked hastily on his door—“Monsieur Darboise!”

His neighbours’ voices! He opened the door. The old lady was already tumbling down the first of the cellar steps, dragging the little boy after her. The young woman, who held the other child in her arms, called to him: “There are several of them; quick—come down.”

“I’ll follow you.”

She had made a detour to warn him. A sort of shame prevented them both from running. He

looked up as they crossed the little yard, and had the impression that the aeroplanes were passing directly over his head. He quickened his steps—the whistle of a falling bomb was perceptible. As he reached the steps, he reeled, and the walls shook around him. Quite close—in the street—that one! The thunderclap was followed by a long rattling crash of broken bricks.

“Monsieur Darboise!”

He went down on the heels of his neighbours. Madame Trousselier had lighted a candle, and the child was clinging to her skirts in terror. The other baby was crying, and the young woman was trying to comfort it.

Jean felt himself drawn near to these beings who slept under the same roof as himself, exposed to the same dangers. To break the anxious silence, he spoke: “It was just the right weather for Taubes!”

“I expected it,” said the old woman, “after that one that came reconnoitring at noon today. That such horrors should be permitted!” She added in a hollow voice: “And after what our men see!”

“Is your husband yonder?” said Jean, turning to the daughter-in-law.

She made a sign of assent, and her eyes glittered in the candlelight.

“Hush! It’s not over yet!” Another explosion, again in the vicinity. They stared at each other. Shadows and emotions gave a tragic look

to their faces. The sirens were howling again, like ships in distress. A calm seemed to follow—was it the end? The infant was filling the cellar with his wails.

“He’s hungry,” said the grandmother; “let him drink.”

At this the young woman showed signs of modest hesitation. Discreetly, Jean turned away, for which she thanked him with a slight bow.

The old woman brought him a chair. “Sit down, Monsieur Darboise.”

It was several minutes since the last bomb exploded. Other detonations, not so loud, followed. These were the sounds of guns.

“It’s no joke, their coming now,” Madame Trousselier went on, “with all those troops here, eh?”

“What troops?”

Didn’t he know? Two infantry regiments, some Belgians, and some Fusiliers, all the reserves of one sector of the line arrived for rest at St. Pol, that very morning. And the filthy Boches knew it well!

“I think we can go and have a look,” said Jean.

The guns were silent. But one of the sirens again wailed its four sinister crescendos.

“Don’t go out!” the young woman said, hastily.

“Pooh! What’s this, compared with Douaumont?”

“Were you there?”

"It was there that I got my wound."

The old woman intervened: "My son—he wasn't far from there, then!"

"Really? What regiment?"

"First Engineers."

From pure courtesy, Jean asked a few detailed questions, though slightly embarrassed to detect, at least on the young woman's part, a certain reserve.

The danger appeared to be passing away. He went out again in spite of entreaties, and just in time, as he reached the threshold, to hear a familiar rending sound, followed by the rush of the gapers who had ventured out of doors. At the end of the street, three hundred yards away, a huge jet of flame leaped up in a thunderous roar, and he saw the roof of a house lifted like a saucepan lid.

Another bomb. He retraced his steps into the yard. Over his head there was the drone of suspicious engines. Searchlights were sweeping the sky, where their shafts seemed to dissolve. Lightnings aimed at the ground now and again flashed from the sky—the searching of enemy eyes, like the gleaming eyes of eagles; and in the seconds that followed, it was rarely that the bursting of an infernal machine did not set one trembling.

It was no use swaggering. He went down again to the cellar. The baby had had his meal and fallen asleep.

Some minutes went by. Madame Trousselier led the conversation back to her son, and Jean's

curiosity was aroused to notice what an unconcerned air the young woman affected every time he was mentioned.

He pretended to be interested: "When is he coming home on furlough?"

"It's not regular," said the old lady.

"Well, there's a regular turn——"

Madame Trousselier hesitated, and her daughter-in-law intervened sharply: "We don't want him on leave again!"

Regardless of her mother-in-law's distressful winks, the young woman unloaded her heart: "Why? No need to make any mystery of it—all the neighbourhood knows!"

She told of the bad habits the man had fallen into just before the war, the way he started going downhill, and, since then—what a collapse! Think of it, that life of a beast, too, living in holes, summer and winter. He had come home for Easter. Ah, those seven days! And the worst of it was the end. After being continuously drunk for seventy-two hours, he had gone to bed just when he ought to have been setting off, swearing that his mind was made up, and he would not go back. The police could come and get him. He was fed up with the job! What was waiting for him? Court-martial? Better a dozen bullets in the body than this everlasting martyrdom, your only prospect to go "over the top" when your turn came! It had been a frightful night, and the two women had gone down on their knees to beg

him to go. But, sucking at a pint of rum, he got more passionate as his default increased.

"In the end, then, he went back?"

"Yes, two days late."

"Did they punish him?"

"Two months' imprisonment, and his next leave will be put back three months."

When her daughter-in-law had finished, Madame Trousselier, in a tone that trembled with bitterness, asked: "Does that help you to get over it?"

"Is it all true, or isn't it?"

Jean broke in by declaring, "Madame, your daughter—knew that I was a friend." He felt that he had a sort of mission to fulfil in the matter of these two women. He counselled patience—the war would come to an end: "Let him get over it and take up his work again—you'll lead him into good ways again."

He looked at the young woman—"You will become happy again."

"You can't think how happy we were!"

Finally, the alarm being over, Jean bade his neighbours good-night. Not feeling sleepy, he wandered about in the neighbourhood, where a hastily dressed crowd soon came thronging, more in curiosity than fright. The names of victims were exchanged—the little tailor, for instance, at the corner of the street, pulped by the bomb that blew off the roof of his house. Some who had narrowly escaped were congratulating each other. Others talked of the luck of the draper's wife, who

had just jumped out of bed when the breech of a 75mm. shell went through it. Some discussed the probable number of enemy aeroplanes. They were of one mind in blaming our gunners, and our aviators. Nobody was at his post at first. The pilots all lodged at Malo, three miles from the camp. At least ten minutes had gone by when they were seen rushing along on their bouncing cars.

Jean went on as far as the quarters. Most of the men were up and in their shirt-sleeves, gazing at the pale sky. The school had seemed to be marked; four bombs had fallen near it, and all round it. The cellars, too, were not in the least reliable, and the key of the only vaulted cellar was missing. Sergeant Gandolphe, fortunately, who was on duty, had got out of the difficulty by bursting the door open.

"It wouldn't surprise me if they came back!" the chief announced.

At a little after midnight, Jean was gradually falling asleep when he awoke with a sudden start, and sat up stupidly. The siren! Yes, the wail was again rending the placid night. Then in successive crashes two bombs announced their close arrival. Then the horrible smashing uproar of a third, and the windows in his room fell in pieces. He was out of bed with a jump, and as he slipped on his pants he had a paralysing vision of the shattered tailor. To the sound of another and nearer explosion he threw himself into the

passage, obliquely lighted by the moon. There, he thought of his neighbours. Downstairs they came running. The old woman passed in front of him, leading little Désiré. There was the sound of a fall on the staircase, and a slight groan. He ran forward and up several steps. Moonlight was coming in through a shattered window, and a baby was crying lustily. Jean saw that the young woman had fallen, and in trying not to hurt the child, had twisted her foot. She was making an effort to get up.

"Give me the baby!" He took it from her into his arms—a living toy, fragile as his own. With the help of her hands she half rose, and then stammered—"A sprain! Or the leg—broken—I don't know."

A whistling sound was followed by a flash that lit up the ground floor. Through a window they saw a wall at the end of the garden collapse as though shaken by earthquake, and a pungent smoke blew in.

"Oh, la, la! Worse than Douaumont!" Jean said jokingly, still master of himself.

"The baby!" she implored.

"Wait!" Carrying the child, who was startled out of his complaints, Jean lightly descended the steps, crossed the yard, and reached the cellar door. Down below he quickly put his burden into the grandmother's arms, as she struggled with a box of matches. The old woman grasped his arm—"Germaine?"

"An accident—she's hurt her foot; I'm going to fetch her."

"Shall you want—" The foundations shook in an explosion. From the street sounded dismal cries and sounds of panic. Madame Trousselier was trembling: "Stay there!" he said.

With redoubled energy he quickly climbed the stairs. In his absence the young woman had succeeded in getting into a sitting position, and as he came up, she made another attempt to rise—and gave a groan. He bent over her—"Allow me, I'm going to carry you."

"Where are the children?"

"In shelter."

"Thanks."

He stooped lower, to find a sure hold. She made no sign to forbid him. He inhaled the scent of her loosened hair. "Allow me, allow me," he said, though there was no reason to.

His weak left arm, half crippled as it was, encircled her waist—"Don't be afraid!"

With a harsh effort, he lifted her. Not so heavy! Step by step, he went down. He held her closely, and she him, their faces and their breasts close together, their breath mingled. They passed the landing, the yard, the passage.

"Are you all right?" he said, in a very low voice.

His pulse was beating madly. Here was the cellar stair now. They were guided by the flicker of a match that the old lady had just struck, but a draught blew it out just as they reached the

bottom. Jean had been able to note where a chair stood, and he steered for it. Delaying, in spite of himself, the end of that embrace, he was going to put his burden down, when he felt a convulsive, half-unconscious pressure, and knew that she was preventing him. He kissed her neck, and then their lips met.

PART II

BOOK IV

CHAPTER I

A CONCESSION

WHO, in those days, could carry out his least desire?

For the rapacious Boches attacked furiously. A third time that same night, twice the next day, then again at midnight, they came back; and the following Sunday, a squadron of thirty Taubes rushed their droning engines over and attacked for two hours in groups of four, obeying the order of a machine-gun.

Never since the bombardment with heavy shells of a year before had the place suffered so much. Truth to tell, most of the cellars offered protection enough. The people who lost their lives, principally at St. Pol, owed it almost exclusively to their own rashness; for instance, the two workmen, fathers of five children, disembowelled in the Rue de la République by a bomb of which a fragment, ricochetting off the pavement, broke an urchin's skull more than two hundred yards away.

At the Port there were many victims. The

civilian dockers stayed away from work, but for the soldiers there was no leave of absence; and even in twenty months there had been no time to construct shelters for them. It was certainly nothing but luck on the last day, that the two hundred men, gathered in the mess-room at midday under a frail roof, were not blown to pieces, as they might have been by a well-placed bomb. Two bombs fell hard by, on the Textile itself. One of them by falling among sacks of oats had its destructiveness nullified; the other turned inside out the sentry at the entrance. In front of the wool hangar, three men and six horses were killed at one blow, in a paved corner where a pool of blood lingered, and then a stain.

One hundred and ten dead, three hundred and seventy wounded, such was the return for that week-end. "No victims, little damage," the official report announced.

Jean lived through those days in a sort of sensuous intoxication. To and from his room in the cellar he went and came continuously. Danger stimulated him. Having taken in hand "the organisation of that sector" as he said, he insisted, at the beginning of the second day, on his neighbours' installing themselves in the cellar. He did the removing for them. After which, their entreaties decided him in his turn to desert his ground floor. A corner of the cellar was assigned to him. "Every one at home!" His gaiety scattered the terror in abeyance.

The young woman's sprain left her hardly able to drag herself from her bed as far as an arm-chair. Jean had some notion of massage, picked up in the realms of sport; and half playfully, half in earnest, he assumed the part of amateur bone-setter. And all they asked for was to rely on him. Morning and night he insisted that the ailing foot should be entrusted to him.

Then he would take in his hand, with childish compassion, the slender ankle in which he thought some ligament must have given way. The preliminary handling was light but masterly. Then with his supple, sensitive fingers, he slowly and gently massaged the injured muscles.

It was on a Monday evening, at last, that Germaine called him as he came in, and whispered that her mother-in-law had just gone out with the little one—an errand to the other end of the town; and the demon of possession seized upon Jean.

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Life had resumed its normal course. For a while the Trousseliers continued to live in the cellar after Jean had returned to his own room. In the evening he used to go down for a little chat, and conscientiously fulfilled his duties as masseur.

The ankle was getting better. One morning when Jean, off duty, had stayed in bed, there came a knock at the door. Germaine!

Far more than compromising herself she seemed to fear being thought importunate. As she came

in, she always put the question: "I'm not disturbing you?"

One rainy afternoon, Darboise offered to draw her portrait. She sat for him, and was struck with astonishment at the pencil sketch he made of her in an hour. It was a successful drawing; the three-quarters length of the figure happily displayed his model's special charm, which lay in the pure outlines of her shoulders and neck. Yet Jean found himself embarrassed when she asked him to write a dedication on it—for her alone! She would not show the drawing to any living soul!

He had given her full warning that he would never write her a line—a matter of prudence! By way of getting round it, he traced, "To my dear little Germaine," in microscopical letters which lost themselves in the corsage.

"Aren't you going to put your name?"

"Why, yes—look." His initials only, a J and a D, very tiny. This was the utmost possible concession, and would hardly compromise him. All the same, he thought remorsefully of that sketch of Andrée Sartiagues in her garden hat—Andrée, his betrothed of that day—which, in playfulness or modesty, he had signed in the same way.

CHAPTER II

A COSTLY LIE

OH, the fantastic heart of men! Towards her to whom he was unfaithful, his affection had not changed. He wrote to her every day; in the letters which he received from her, he delighted as always. Seized sometimes with confusion, when he thought of the contemptuousness of his conduct, his indolence rejected that plea of unpleasant recoil upon himself.

The lie he was acting cost him dear. When after several weeks his wife's letter hinted again at their approaching reunion, he answered in intentionally evasive terms. Difficulties were cropping up; there were new regulations, and more severe. He had come to wonder if that journey, of which they both were dreaming,—but he pretended to see the light of a sure revenge when his own leave came round, and at the very worst, it was not more than two months off.

Two months! The tone of Andrée's reply resounded cruelly in his heart. Two months? Could she live so long?

"Ah, my love," she wrote, "if you knew how sad and dark a thing life is when I am away from you—quite not worth living. Those whom I love the most after you, how little they are to me in the main!" She acknowledged that from time to time she had to suffer the reproaches of her mother, who rebelled, as all mothers do, against that exclusive attachment.

A madness of regret seized her for that postponed visit which, according to himself, would have been so easily managed; she was ready to curse the child's illness. And if she had only known, she would have left the baby in her mother's care and risked everything rather than be deprived of that priceless consolation.

Once, a shade of bitterness appeared: "I should be wrong, dearest, shouldn't I, to believe that you were more content than I with your part in this great sadness?"

Then, immediately regaining her confidence—"But we mustn't drive away hope altogether, must we? Stir about, and find a way. Is there only that Sergeant Lavigne?"

She suggested his going to look up the d'Estignards again. With *their* influence—and as long as they showed themselves so obliging!

Jean was irresolute. How much he had longed for that visit, of which only the distant view showed to his soul wide vistas of golden felicity! Only the night before his mistress had, with her tiresome trifling, rekindled in him the desire for

intellectual intimacy, which the sentimental fellow fancied with one being only.

But to risk an exposure! No; he did not really fear any act of ill conduct on Germaine's part. Too freely she denied that she was jealous, and even interested herself—Oh, paradox!—in Andrée, asking for news of the little invalid. The most formidable aspect of the matter, Darboise felt, was his wife's incredible gift of introspection. Let the least sign put her on the track, she would go through to the end. And the consequences, with her devoted disposition, would be a scandal, a tragedy! He must do all to avoid that, all that would imperil the dear conjugal structure in which his life's happiness was locked up.

His reply did not contain anything that would relieve the anguished heart yonder, and his heart was heavy with the knowledge. The advice concerning the d'Estignards worried him. He had to invent the falsehood that he had been there twice without finding them in, that he had left his card, and was waiting for them to write, but nothing had come. Recently, in the town, he had met Monsieur d'Estignard, who had taken his leave almost immediately with a sufficiently curt "Au revoir." Jean concluded from that coldness not to set foot inside the villa again.

His employment had not changed. He was an old member now of the potato fatigue, in which he spent nine hours a day!

For a little while now their party had been under

closer surveillance. The sergeant or the adjutant would come and throw some contemptuous remarks at them as soon as they heard laughter or even chatter. At once the men's temper had altered. Some got themselves put on the sick list; others began to "ca' canny." Recent consignments of potatoes, too, were sticky and rotten to the core. So, as the men no longer troubled to use the cleaning-knives thoroughly, the heap of *débris* mounted high, became enormous. They saved scarcely thirty pounds out of two hundred. Remarks were made; and one afternoon the adjutant arrived, accompanied by Deludat. When he ascertained the extent of the waste, the lieutenant lost his temper and uttered threats. The other, frightened, made a statement against Sergeant Depussay, that he did not look after his men—was he seen there one hour a day? There was quite a disturbance, but Fauvel, since Depussay was his friend, cut it short at headquarters. The sergeant felt himself threatened—"Ah, you'll get me jawed, will you!"

Becoming very assiduous for three days, he distributed C. B. broadcast and at random. Naturally it fell on innocent men, on little Navarro, for example, who wept over it. "Military justice!" chaffed Decante.

The latter and Jean were spared. Depussay had scented in Darboise a chap who could defend himself. The former plate-layer he treated gently in return for certain services rendered.

The sergeant soon relaxed his vigilance again and returned to his former vagaries. He came morning and evening, turning up unexpectedly; and without considering any excuse he punished those whom he surprised chatting or doing nothing, or the one whose heap stood for the least work done.

Jean hated him cordially, and Decante Jesuitically encouraged the sentiment, for the latter had arranged with the sergeant to screen his absence as occasion arose, and yet performed this duty badly, even trying in an underhand way to get him into trouble. The duplicity ruffled Jean: "Promise him nothing, if you dislike him!"

"Everything's all right against those vermin!"

Since they were reduced to talking in low voices, Darboise came again under his neighbour's influence. Decante had resumed his pet subject. He increased his sarcasm against the absurdities of the régime to which they were submitting: no one where he ought to be, pilferings, despotism, incompetence! The bungling and squandering of that senseless government! In a leisure moment he took his companion to see the hundred thousand sacks that had just been allowed to rot where they lay, for want of a fatigue party of thirty men to carry them away to dry! Sacks that were worth one franc sixty-five centimes each! He pointed out the hole made in the roof of the Textile by one of the bombs of May 21st, and asked whose inspiration it was to put a delivery

of sugar right under the hole. A night of heavy rain had done it no good!

These discoveries no longer slid indifferently from Darboise's mind. His attention was aroused, his critical mind chafed. Besides—and the other laid subtle emphasis on the point—the same unreasonable trickery of which they had such harrowing examples, wasn't it seen again all through the general management of military operations among the Allies? It was to their lack of organisation that one must attribute the fact, alas, that the success of their arms, instead of reaching its zenith, seemed to be declining.

Decante sounded his companion: "This war, now, between ourselves, who is there that isn't fed up with it—except the profiteers?"

With those he cynically included the rulers of both sides—"those who held the handle of the frying-pan, and whose present life for a certainty, with its conferences and banquets, was a good deal more attractive than their tasks after the war, when multitudes would call them to account. It was only among those blackguards and their tools on the big newspapers that despicably excited public opinion, that one still found people mad enough to talk out loud about crushing the enemy!"

"Which has hardly got started yet!"

June was coming. The frightful contest around that fortress of Lorraine had become doubly fierce. The fort of Vaux had fallen. A German

advance had been going on irresistibly for several days: "We've swanked enough! They'll end, I tell you, by taking Verdun!"

This made Jean clench his fists. Would they allow Verdun to fall, that Verdun which *they* thought they had saved, for which a hundred thousand of them had given their lives or shed their blood? What good had they done, then? Bitter vexation took possession of him at the thought of heroes betrayed, and of great leaders unworthy of those who had given themselves for sacrifice. Thus was his morale undermined; would it suddenly give way?

For counterpoise to this pessimism, Jean no longer had Cazenave's playful prankishness. Obligated as he was to devote himself in the evening to his coaxing mistress, he had had to drop the Bordelais almost completely. In shame he refrained from revealing to his friend his real reason—a discretion which was of no avail.

Towards ten o'clock one night, there came a knocking on the shutter: "Alarm, old chap!"

Cazenave turned the handle of the door, seeking to enter, but it was bolted: "Have you locked yourself in?"

Jean, annoyed by the other's want of ceremony—he was now shaking the door—called out: "What is it you want?"

"My cartridge-pouches."

Then Darboise remembered he had borrowed them for a kit-inspection: "That's all right—I'll bring them to you."

"I'm not fooling—let me in!"

He waited for a few seconds. The devil take the intruder! Then suddenly Cazenave appeared to grasp the situation—"Ah, old chap, I beg your pardon!"

Jean was a good last to muster, arriving as the company got into motion. He had been declared absent after two calls. After a furious rating from his corporal he thought it was done with; but Bousquet, sergeant of his section, sent him to the lieutenant.

Jean had little fear of that. Fauvel! Only the night before last they had discussed for an hour the talent of Claude Boucheron, whom the former traveller in lace disparaged, though he hardly knew him.

"Here I am, lieutenant," said Darboise, coming up, rifle on shoulder.

"Very annoying, my boy!" said the other, with a formal air: "For the sake of example, I've been obliged to give you four days in the guard-room."

Jean's throat tightened: "Seriously?"

"What do you mean—'seriously'? Haven't you deserved it?"

"I'm not complaining," said Darboise.

"And you can thank me for not speaking to the captain."

"Very well, I thank you, lieutenant."

With flushed cheeks, humiliated, and whistling to disguise his anger, Jean regained the ranks.

The column turned to the right in the Avenue de la Mer. As they went along the road, Jean nursed his wrath. Punished—for being so little behind time! And by that Fauvel whom he had nearly taken for a friend. He cursed him—the treacherous fellow! Swinging his heavy knapsack, and checking the rifle that was slipping off in the absence of a shoulder-strap, he wondered gloomily what the alarm meant—was it into real danger they were being led?

They went nearly two miles, and then entered by a drawbridge that “Western Defence” of which they had to occupy a bastion. Their part was to oppose a possible landing. Decante was not slow to emphasise the thanklessness of the task; what good were they doing, decorating that parapet before it was necessary? What protection was there for them, if the matter was really serious, against the shells that the German ironclads would pour on them from four different directions? Their place was in the casemates. But were there any casemates?

Fortunately the end of the alarm was telephoned towards midnight. Just as they were starting back, Jean was approached by Cazenave, who was pushing his bicycle: “Is it true that that brute of a Fauvel’s given you four days’ clink?”

“I shall get my own back!”

“You might try, through the adjutant——”

“No,” Darboise refused, in no humour to ask favours of any one.

"Look!" Monade himself was coming up. Sounded by Cazenave, he seemed disposed to nothing so little as to intercede: "Hum! The lieutenant, you see! I only meddle with what concerns me."

But when the Bordelais winked and whispered, "Poor Darboise!" Monade slapped himself on the thigh, and becoming at once gentle and even cordial, he said: "I'll speak to the lieutenant!"

And indeed, Fauvel sent for Darboise: "I gave you a fright, then!"

"Lieutenant?"

"Why, yes—your four days' guard-room. Do you think—it wasn't a joke? I may chew the rag a bit, but I'm not a professional soldier, and I don't do those dirty tricks——"

Stupefied, Jean could only believe him.

"Indeed, it wasn't worth while to send the adjutant to me," Fauvel ended with a show of magnanimity. He kept Darboise with him to talk art as far as the quarters, but Jean trembled like a skittish thoroughbred, for he had felt the whip.

In other respects, the incident did not pass without annoying consequences. It was said in his section that he had been shown clemency only on account of his hitherto stainless squad-book. Valentin, his corporal, had taken a dislike to him for some time as the only man in the squad who did not sleep at the quarters, so that he had to run after him with his pay, his supplies, his to-

bacco. "You wait till I report you!" he yelped in his shrill falsetto.

The threat was always formidable. With such puppets commanding, could one ever know how things would turn out?

For some days past, Jean had recruited a new companion. Mascart had written to him: "I have a little friend at Dunkerque, and he's bored. Go and look him up." He was a comical being at first sight, this Véchaud. In civil life he was clerk of the sub-prefecture of Mortagne, of which Mascart was tax-collector. Now he was doing duty as secretary at the office of the cold-storage department popularly known as the "Frigorifique," where he had been for eighteen months. He had no idea of quitting it, but was rather tired of the exclusive society of butchers' assistants.

Darboise thought him plainly insignificant, and paid him another call a week later only for conscience' sake. But when he appeared, Véchaud's face lighted up: "I was so much afraid I shouldn't see you again."

Appreciative of the proffered friendship, Jean went again, and often thereafter.

CHAPTER III

A CONTRADICTIONARY SITUATION

Two lots of bad news fell on him, blow by blow. The first came in a letter which bore the imprint of a hospital. From some one wounded? Hastily he tore it open—a note for him written by a nurse, “by request of Monsieur Boucheron.”

He? He? Jean’s heart sank; the great Claude Boucheron whom he had believed to be finally out of harm’s way! A few lines only, without details—a shell fragment in the thigh—a serious wound, but not one that seemed to endanger his life.

“Ah, that crowns all!” Darboise recalled his distress when, as he left home at the end of August, 1914, he heard that his wonderful master was in the front line in the horrible struggles in the North. He had been indignant ever since. Was it a wise use of one’s resources at the very outset to risk the life of this man forty years old, already a famous artist, whose talent was an established thing?

Jean hastened to send a note to the obliging nurse. Thanking her, he told her what man she

had in her care, and would she be so good as to let him know in a little while that all was going on well?

The letter that came next day bore the heading of the *Quotidien*—Chinard's answer, that he had so long expected! It was curious that Darboise had a foreboding of evil as soon as he took the letter in his hand.

It was a short letter—a page and a half of the familiar flowing hand: "Poor old chap," it began; "it's always unpleasant to have such a duty to fulfil, but to be entirely candid——"

There! His drawings did not give satisfaction. Oh, that was not *his* opinion, but that of the proprietor himself, and it did not seem likely that he would alter it. What did Letourneur object to? Why, a generally defective attitude, a lack of tact, even of decency. Was he ridiculing people? Who were these taskmasters he had sketched, these brutes with many stripes, exactly comparable to the series of "Heads of Boches" that another paper had issued? Were *those* our officers? Were *those* fair samples of these auxiliaries whom one made fun of for their amiable insouciance, for their refined fancies? What a scandal such a publication would have brought on the paper? Fine advertisement, that, for the French soldier!

Chinard wound up by adding: "Knowing you, I am well aware that you have insisted on sincerity, but that's not what was wanted from you."

Jean crumpled the letter in his fingers. The blow was a severe one. Fortunately, his artist's mind poured over him that placidity which sincere creative genius knows. He had no fear at all that he had been mistaken. He recalled the whole series of views of stirring life; Claude Boucheron had liked them, and that was appreciation enough. Wiping away some traces of perspiration with the back of his hand, he murmured, "The idiots!"

What he felt was anger. So Letourneur really rebuked him for sincerity! Ah, this hatred of truth, this conventionality and make-believe, the plagues of that mournful age! Lies and sophistication everywhere, in art as in politics; and they who would raise their heads to tell the truth, always suppressed. These war-profiters, these manipulators of shady business, these directors of disreputable papers—yes, it was just their game to prevent people from seeing clearly, to prevent them from having portraits put before them of the bestiality of their tyrannized brothers!

He would make no attempt to get himself taken on again. He would leave all those people to wallow in their filth and stupidity. He dreamed of further revengeful work. But then, now that success was discounted, there disappeared his last hope of returning to Paris, of escaping from the atmosphere that he began to find stifling. And in the vanity of his twenty-five years he asked why he should not confess to himself that a little

glory would have tickled his fancy, had he been able to see his signature in the columns of a great daily!

He tried to master his feelings, and succeeded. Let it be so! It can't be helped! At bottom, what most irritated him was Chinard's attitude, the vaguely superior tone of his letter, the way in which his friend forbore to declare himself.

Jean's imagination went further. No; Chinard could hardly have stood up for him—Chinard, who had so often been glad to thank him for favours of the highest sort. And when it would have been so easy for him, well placed in the firm as he was, he whose assent would assuredly have influenced Paulette's. Darboise remembered how he had always, for his part, helped his best friends and pushed them forward, and this one more than any other, finding him useful backers and acquaintances, and introducing him to Claude Boucheron. Only recently Jean had rejoiced in the other's success as if it had been his own.

It scared Jean to have a presentiment of secrets that his generosity had not suspected at all, and this gave rise to vapours of egotism, perhaps of jealousy. He recoiled from them. What, could Chinard be changed by success into a fool, like so many others, drunk with a facile renown, that he should turn the light on to so wretched a side of him? He could hardly bear the thought; and it was really with the idea of destroying it that he

seized paper and pen. The retort gushed from him all at once.

He began with a confession, superb in its impudence, of his confidence in his talent, to which he had never given better expression than in these pencil drawings, even if they had not had the luck to please. Then he put in a cruel but just word with regard to Letourneur. He bowed to the decision. He thanked Chinard—if he had done all he could. But he was anxious to have his own opinion—which Chinard had not given him. Was it an oversight? Where had the memory gone of their brotherly discussions? In his desire to see that time born again, in the fear that a chasm would open between them unless they took care, Jean took the liberty in all sincerity of being the first to speak. Well, he wanted to shout at him: “Mind where you’re going!”

Darboise honestly believed that he was acting like a true friend. He warned him of the clear impression he had had for a little while that Chinard, by reason of deception, of making concessions and doing pretty tricks so as to keep the public favour, was on the way to spoil himself. His last sketches, in Monday’s *Quotidien* were rather forced, affected, unnatural!

“Success, old man, you have got; and no one wants it for you more than I do. But you were worthy of reaching a higher standard. Return to nature, I implore you; get clear of fashionable smartness. Let’s have men, not marionettes;

women, not dummies. We've had enough of Kirchner, by God!"

Jean read the letter again, and hesitated. Too little considerate, perhaps? But had they considered *him*? Why, he was candid, just candid; a guiding principle of conduct which he liked and had chosen in his career. It was meant to make his friend reflect. They had said many such things to each other formerly, with pitched battles sometimes, from which they emerged better friends. Come, then; if the other was angry, he was no longer his Chinard! But no; he would not be angry!

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For some time past the attitude of the old lady, Madame Trousselier, had made him thoughtful. At first it was she who had looked after his room, while relations of friendly familiarity between them dated from the days of the bombardment.

Germaine, recovered from her sprain, had claimed the domestic duty on the pretext of relieving her mother-in-law's rheumatism. From time to time Darboise went up to the first floor, announcing that he had come for a chat. On two such occasions, the old lady had gone early to bed, giving no reason. A third time, when he ventured on a chaffing protest, she answered him coolly and with rather a sullen look, so that he told his fears to Germaine at once.

She reassured him: "It's because she's in pain,

darling, that she looked at you like that. And then, anyhow, she doesn't care a rap!"

"What if she writes to your husband?"

"She wouldn't do that; and even then——"

"Well?"

"I think I'm the only one that runs a risk."

"Ah, excuse me!" Jean rebelled. "Don't you see he might slip away from over there and come to shoot at us?"

"Not at you; at me perhaps——"

"Do you think I should let him?"

"Pooh! If he killed the kiddies at the same time, what should I care?"

He rebuked her, suddenly disconcerted by fancies which seemed to spring from the depths of disconsolate sorrow.

It was notable that Germaine did not affect the melancholy, misunderstood individual. Her face, bearing, and chatter all bespoke a childish light-heartedness, ready to be amused by anything. She was a little mystified at first by Jean's caustic chaff or ironical gravity, but had got used to it quicker than he had looked for; and now she laughed beforehand at the drolleries he retailed in his most serious tones. So he let himself go all the more in that direction, delighted to discover, in his turn, a sort of roguishness in her. No fool, that little woman—and to think in what different surroundings she had been brought up! Flattered in his self-vanity, he acted the indulgent pasha.

From time to time, their talk tended towards

more intimate confidences, but it was not Darboise's wish. It was she who, as she became more familiar, evinced a curiosity which betokened true friendship. One subject attracted her especially—"Do tell me something—about your wife, and your home."

He avoided the question, but she insisted: "How do you get on together? What is she like? She's called Andrée, isn't she? Tell me if she's tall or short, dark or fair?"

She besought him for a long time to show her his wife's photograph. When he refused she showed a very unusual sulkiness. At last, in sheer weariness, he gave way: "My word! How pretty she is! What a stylish woman!" she exclaimed, and then added: "She must have been thinking of you while she was being taken. You can see it in her eyes, how much she loves you. She does love you, eh?"

"Yes, certainly, she loves me."

"And what about the little one?"

Without further pressure, Jean drew the other photo from his pocket-book. Delicate retouching had glorified the innocent gaze with an angelic expression. The dimples in the little naked body seemed made for kissing. Germaine was enraptured—"Not a year old? How strong and fine he is!" And looking at him tenderly, she said: "Nothing surprising in that—seeing that he is the child of you two!"

"All children are beautiful."

"More or less!"

In the short silence that followed, both were thinking of Germaine's second baby, little Gabriel, whose dull eyes, defective ears and belated development pointed to the guilt of the drunken parent.

Such conversations as this were renewed, and Jean ended by taking his part in them with a smile. What feeling was influencing Germaine? Whatever it was, they came almost every evening to talking of the far-off home and the loved ones in its shelter. And Jean's blind folly was not far from believing that this homage went a little way towards atoning for his betrayal.

One evening when he returned depressed from the Textile,—where great and dreaded changes were rumoured,—anxious at the absence of news of Claude Boucheron, wondering if he had done wrong to write harshly to Chinard, and feeling more bitterly than ever the absence of Andrée, who alone could have lightened the burden of his cares, Germaine came and sat down by him;

"My poor old friend is looking miserable!"

He denied it. She insisted: "I can feel it; I know you, too! You're moping!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes, yes, you are!" She added, coaxingly, in a very low voice: "Tell me—why—don't you get her to come?"

He started, as though the sore spot in his heart had been nipped: "Who?"

"Your wife."

"Ah, I shouldn't think of it!"

"And why?"

"Impossible, to begin with; it's forbidden!"

"Bah! There are plenty of soldiers here like you who don't worry about that!"

She went on to details: "Look, there's Depus-say, your sergeant. Well, his wife spent a whole fortnight here last month. And your lieutenant, he's just had his for a long time."

"How well informed you are!"

Germaine pressed the matter no further that evening after this last reflection—"Your poor wife! How she must worry in secret away from you!"

Jean's troubled thought was: "She's anything but commonplace, Germaine!"

The following evenings, Germaine abstained from direct reference to the question, but she dexterously turned the conversation on Andrée. Suddenly she even entreated him to show her a letter from Andrée. He was shocked: "You're thoughtless!" he said.

She made excuses, confessing her ingenuous longing just to see what pretty names she called him.

"What can that matter to you?" he said.

"Or to you? What nice things do you write to her?"

He was still firm and chilling. She went on: "You must write to her about coming. She *must* be happy." After a second's interruption she said: "*I* love her because you love her. I

love everybody and everything that you love, do you see?"

It was said so simply and so innocently that he was deeply affected.

After two more days, Germaine unmasked her guns. Andrée's coming was the sovereign remedy, and she almost seemed to credit it with the virtue of a charm. Why, there must be ways of getting over the difficulties, since others had done it! She mentioned Hirschfeld, assistant baggage-master, who had just rented a room for his wife in the Rue Gambetta.

Jean no longer protested absolutely against it. Besides, he had lately seen Lavigne, who had renewed his offer of assistance. And the real entreaties which covered Andrée's letters reverted to his mind—he must go and see the d'Estignards again! Who knows that he was not mistaken in their attitude?

Germaine returned to the charge: "It would be so jolly for you, in these two big rooms!"

"Ah, not here, in any case!"

Germaine raised her timidly imploring eyes to his: "I would look after you both."

Suddenly unnerved, he cried: "You're dreaming!" and she was silent. A minute later she went on in a subdued voice: "And the little one—would she bring him, do you think?"

"Never in this world! What an idea!"

"Why not?"

"A child of one year, who's just been ill——"

"They say that a change of air's good when they've just had whooping-cough." But, in fear of offending him, and anxious to make concessions, she said: "Ah, well! You'd be removing. More's the pity!"

"That would be quite necessary."

"I would find you what you wanted——" She read his thoughts. "No, not about here; at the other end of St. Pol."

In spite of himself, Jean was thrilled with the distant possibility. "But, in that case, you wouldn't see her!" he said chaffingly, "you who wanted to so much!"

"Some day—when she had to go out—I should go and stroll in front of your gate——"

"And afterwards—I should come back here, perhaps?"

"As you pleased!" It was always "as you pleased!" with her. He began to find himself curiously perplexed. How should he decide? How many reasons there were for, and how many against it! A contradictory situation! What was this feeling of Germaine's for him? Was it considerate friendship or the meekest of love? And what about himself? Would he like her less or more for this self-denial—or this slavishness? The one thing certain was that in the first prolonged break in their talk, it was towards the other woman, towards his wife, that his hesitating heart leaped.

CHAPTER IV

A GOOD FRIEND

DARBOISE found himself on "concert fatigue."

It often happened, on Saturdays, that the detachment received a certain number of invitations to some performance at Malo, in which case the sergeant-major appointed some men to go, without consulting them.

There were six of them that day, in charge of Gandolphe, who, being extremely fond of music, generally managed not to miss these concerts. Jean hardly knew the sergeant, except as a non-com. who did not give the company much trouble, in which indeed he had only figured for a few weeks. A professor, he had heard. His physical appearance—eyeglass, disagreeable features, and a rather awkward walk—had nothing very attractive about it. In the tramcar, however, when Gandolphe made him some advances, Jean met them readily.

The festivity was taking place at the Casino, already filled by a many-coloured crowd. Our friends settled themselves as well as they could in the gallery.

After two orchestral items, brilliantly commonplace, some extemporised comedians came on and played *Asile de Nuit*. Jean had the incomparable author too visibly in his mind, and he yawned at the painful mediocrity of the performance.

The tenor Devriès, mobilised at Dunkerque, then appeared on the platform, and sang a famous page from Gluck in beautiful style.

"Not bad, that!" Darboise admitted.

Devriès was followed by Victor Staub, the pianist, also in uniform: "Listen!" whispered Gandolphe.

The virtuoso sat down, and lightly fingering the keyboard, at once evoked its miracles of sound.

It was a Hungarian rhapsody, and Jean followed the dazzling rhythm in wonder, as in the presence of an acrobat, but without a suspicion of emotion. But when Staub, encored, sent flickering round the hall the airy melody of Chopin's *Fantaisie*, he felt himself touched by its charm. A jog from his neighbour's elbow, Gautier Charles, brought him back to earth, and they both smiled at the sight of the sergeant, whose mouth was half-open, his eyes half-closed, his face bathed in a seraphic expression that clashed with his large features and badly placed beard.

In the intermission, they took a turn round to stretch their legs. As they went past the stalls, Jean was surprised to hear himself called. He blushed as he recognised Madame d'Estignard and Sylvaine offering him their hands at the

same time—"Our cousin the stranger, such a stranger!"

The young girl said to him at once: "We've had a letter from Andrée."

"Really?"

"Yes. She says she's dying to see you. After what you told us, we thought it could easily be arranged."

"Less easily now," he stammered.

"My husband is going to make inquiries," Madame d'Estignard said: "I think he may be useful to you."

The ladies kept Jean back for a minute, and he had to submit to friendly reproaches. Why had they not seen him again? He blamed circumstances, and promised soon to make amends. Again he felt the sympathetic attraction of their company. In another way, too, the meeting left him under an affecting inspiration—Sylvaine's smile, the radiance of her colour, the soft light in her eyes, all recalled the memory of Andrée, the memory and the longing. His heart and his senses were carried away with an enthusiasm which bade fair to become an obsession. And to think that Monsieur d'Estignard himself was also prepared—Ah, but for his imbecile mistake, his schoolboy's folly! (Poor Germaine! Decidedly, she mattered little to him!)

Jean listened with listless ear to the second part of the concert. He made only evasive answers to the sergeant and his other companions who

wanted to know to whom he had been talking. Gandolphe asked, in a pleasant way, his opinion of the remaining items. But he hardly answered, engrossed with the two solutions that faced him. Should he send for Andrée or not?

That evening, Germaine mentioned some inquiries she had begun on his behalf—a ground floor in the Rue Jules Ferry, which wasn't dear, but badly situated. Though ready to surrender, Jean put off his decision to the following day.

But the next day he got a cold douche. Events which had long threatened came to pass. It was announced at morning parade that the "minor victuals," the potato, and the coffee fatigues would shortly be discharged, and all the men put into the bake-house, in which one worked for several weeks even at night. The news paralysed Jean. Should he bring his wife to St. Pol and risk such possible complications, and yet have no benefit of her presence? Truly, as long as the luck was against him——

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He had just taken his place in the dinner-room, before his steaming mess-tin, between Decante and Mortas, when the assistant baggage-master, who always brought the post about that time, handed him, along with a letter in the familiar handwriting, another large envelope with a black border.

How many of these announcements had he re-

ceived since the beginning of this disastrous period! Who was it? Who this time? Feverishly he opened it. A mist seemed to enfold him, and the name danced before his eyes——

CLAUDE BOUCHERON

Artist

Knight of the Legion of Honour

He looked around him. The corporal was distributing the wine. Decante was proffering his cup. Prestrot and Gautier, already served, were enjoying their first draught. What a dizziness of solitude to see himself surrounded by these dreary-faced beings, only a few beaming, and those only with sensuous satisfaction!

Claude Boucheron! So it was all over! Jean's eyes went back to the card. He had died three days before, Saturday—ah, the day of the concert! A nameless aversion surged up in Jean. He rose without a word, abandoned the meal, and avoided the stupidly astonished looks of his neighbours.

Oh, the inconceivable cruelty and folly of this war! Lives like his—cut off! And they could not be replaced. Destroyed for ever in a moment, those men of genius whom twenty centuries of gradual development and the mysterious selective processes among individuals and races had brought out in full blossom, flowers all too rare upon the human dunghill!

In an animated hallucination, Jean saw again, the first work signed with that name which chance had brought to his ken. He was a youth, and it was at the autumn exhibition at the Salon. He had been thunderstruck at once, plunged in a delirium of gladness, as though his own road had been made clear.

A panorama unfolded itself before him—the call that he had dared to make on the great man, he the lowliest of students, the very next day. Claude Boucheron, lean and nervous, his eyes searching him through his glasses, with his sunken cheeks and enormous forehead, so restless that he seemed to have quicksilver in his veins, Claude Boucheron welcomed him incredibly, as simply as a younger brother, revealing to him that very day the treasury of his wonderful portfolios. And since then, the hours he had spent in that sixth-floor studio of the Boulevard Montparnasse, where his worshippers, friends, and converts came in procession, where the great men of foreign lands came to do homage to the young master! What animated, even passionate discussions on nature, love, and death, on matter and on form, on art in all its aspects, for Claude Boucheron was poet, musician, painter, sculptor, all rolled in one—a complete incarnation of all in life! What amusing and tragic scenes he had witnessed there! There was the huckster bundled to the door by this still almost unknown artist, who was ripening in poverty, for having offered him a large sum for an

etching on condition that the plate was spoiled after ten proofs had been pulled—"my plate, my flesh, and my blood!" Then, that other day when the artist offered a splendid water-colour to the humble coal-porter who had gone into raptures over it! Above all, Jean recalled all those master-pieces from which truth and fearlessness gushed forth. Lost, the secret of that lofty style—the quick lines of daring and precision that no fumbling attempts could mend! In truth, the prince of living artists of his kind, the real successor of the supreme virtuosi of the graver! And for Darboise, above all, he was the master under whose ægis he had climbed the ladder, whose words, "That's good, my lad," would have cheered him, and did cheer him, amidst the scorn of all the world!

Jean's eyes were full of tears, and he wiped them furtively away. One thought only rose to his brain in his dejection—their war was too hateful!

All this time he had held the other envelope, Andrée's, in his hand. Never had he so delayed opening one of hers. As an inconsolable disciple of Boucheron, he tried artlessly and hard to believe that, for today at least, all that Andrée could have to say to him mattered little.

All the same, he tore it open, and as he read the first lines he murmured: "Well!—she knows!"

Yes; Andrée had thought she was bringing him—carefully and considerably—the bad news she had gathered from an evening paper. "My poor

darling," she wrote: "I can fancy your distress and affliction——"

Jean went on, and his heart was big with emotion, for the matter of the great dead was not dismissed in four sentences. With the intuition of an unusually refined and sensitive nature, she had devoted all her letter to the subject. She recalled in affecting terms the evolution she had herself experienced; how, as a young bride, she had been at first surprised and even startled to see a certain daring, a certain deliberate negligence in the work before which her husband had bowed in worship. Then, the secret process had reached completion as her judgment ripened and her outlook grew wider. She had understood, and not too late, and had soon worshipped in her turn, vanquished by the genius of the wonder-worker in lines. She had been introduced, too, to the master, who treated her as the daughter of the house, and called her his "little queen" when she handed fragrant tea to the illustrious guests he gathered round him.

It was a personal feeling that Andrée was expressing upon this bereavement. "One of the great calamities of the war," she did not fear to write. Jean breathed hard as he read the words which might have come from his own pen. Ah, truly she was his only other self, his incomparable partner!

He had come to a stop in the central bay of the Textile. Adjutant Morinet, of the stores depot,

fifteen yards away, shouted to him: "Hey, you! If I catch you washing your mess-tin in my buckets!"

Jean cleared off,—one of those who would never understand! Other forms either hated or indifferent to him appeared, and he went away. What a stifling place was that, where one was not even free to mourn over the dead!

The prospect of the long afternoon to be spent in cleaning and paring potatoes was painful to him. He looked up Dulac, sergeant on duty for the day, and on the excuse of a severe sick-headache, asked to be let off. The other dared not refuse him and sent him back to St. Pol in charge of Corporal Valentin.

A disillusioned ambulance man, to whom he applied, gave him a tablet of aspirin. He took refuge at once in his room, where Germaine, hearing him, soon sought him anxiously.

"What's the matter?"

He handed her the card. When she had read it, she asked timidly: "Was he a relative of yours?"

"More than that; a friend who——"

She was looking at him. He recoiled from the distress of explaining all that this master stood for to him, and simply repeated, "a good friend."

He felt an imperative need of silence and peace. To get rid of her also he pleaded the headache—a convenient excuse, which was successful.

"Go to sleep, my poor darling."

There, with open eyes fixed on the ceiling, he reflected long in the half-light. Reflect? It was all considered and all was urging him. A bombardment of Hondschoote the night before, only a little way off, had caused many victims. Perhaps his own life was measured. So much the worse, then, for paltry prudence. She should come, and come quickly, Andrée, the only one born to understand him! To see her again, and weep in her arms——!

At five o'clock he jumped up, went out, and took a tramcar. At the end of the day he was always sure to find Lavigne in the Café Terminus, opposite the station, sipping a liqueur. He went and asked for another permit.

BOOK V

CHAPTER I

ANDRÉE'S ARRIVAL

ALL had gone off as well as possible at the station. The detective, having been informed beforehand by Lavigne, cast a complaisant glance on the paper that Andrée presented. And now, on the platform of the crowded tramcar which bore them away, standing and pressed close together, they pretended not to know each other, but the looks they exchanged glistened with love restrained.

At the Mardyck Gate, the Customs men gave the passengers a look of formal inquisitiveness. The bell rang, and the tram moved out between the colourless dunes.

Entering St. Pol, Jean jumped off, having cautiously made a sign to Andrée. She got down also, burdened by her heavy bag. He waited for her twenty yards away, pretending to be absorbed in the contemplation of a poster. She toiled to come up with him, and was a little hurt that he did not come to relieve her. But he apologised:—

“They were watching me—there was someone

in the car." (The someone was Mademoiselle Vandembücke, his ex-landlady, whose neighbours they were becoming again, and who seemed to be following their manœuvre with hostile and suspicious eyes.)

His new landlady, Madame Mafranc, was waiting for them on the doorstep. She had hardly seen Andrée when she cried: "Now I understand why Monsieur was in a hurry!"

They went along the passage, and already Madame was showing them into the combination dining-room and kitchen, where the lighted gas shone over a table nicely laid. Gleefully Jean praised the menu: cream of sorrel soup, a chicken, just finished roasting, a melon whose scent filled the room, fine cherries and strawberries—for which he had paid dearly.

Andrée asked at once to see their bedroom. Entering it before her, Jean began to open the bag. But she went to the door, shut and bolted it; then turning quickly, she held out her arms: "Ah, my darling, my Jean!" In a close embrace they remained, kiss to kiss. As though bewildered, they were grasping again the conception of superlative love: "Ah, I have got you again!" and she broke down.

After a moment of rapture, Jean was tormented by remorse. How could he have deceived her and run the plain risk of losing her? Baffling humanity!

Laughing, she took off her hat and coat: "You

see, dear, how frightful I have made myself, on purpose!"

She had on her tailor-made of the year before, which she had had dyed and remade herself in the fashion—industrious dressmaker!

"Still much too smart for this place!"

"What do the ladies of St. Pol look like, then?"

"Nothing startling!"

Andrée was now looking round the room: "It's little, eh?" he said.

"It's very nice." It was a scanty lodging all the same. What with the bed, wash-stand, dressing-table, and wardrobe, there was only just room left to move. Thoughtfully, she went on: "You told me you were well off for room—in the Rue Gambetta."

"Yes, but—my landladies!"

"I thought they were the best women—on earth!"

"There are two of them. The mother doesn't understand things. She would never have tolerated your staying there unless it was authorised officially. There would have been some fuss!"

"Ah, if that's it!"

"Imagine; when I was coming to the station I met her, the old woman. She's furious with me for leaving them, and demands another month's rent."

It was true. Not without distress did he recall the brief scene when she had called to him: "Hey! Another new month's begun! And Germaine,

too, doesn't want me to let it again—she says you're coming back. That doesn't suit me, that way of doing—nor other things with it, either!"

"Come to dinner!" cried Andrée.

To tell the truth, they both had to exert themselves to do honour to the festivity. They had no great appetite, and seemed tired. Then, facing each other, impatience overcame them.

"Look prettily at me, dearest," she said.

"Like this?"

"Almost."

"Not quite?"

Suddenly serious, she said: "It seems as if there was something amiss for you or for me—something you're hiding from me."

A hearty laugh reassured her: "Perhaps I'm wrong. But—your work? How's it going on just now?"

"Nothing very great. We're all going to be stuck into the 'bake-house'."

"What time must you be there in the morning?"

"Six o'clock."

"Until?"

"Six in the evening. We shall only see each other at night."

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Every day Darboise congratulated himself that he had dared to send for her.

In vain they all bewailed the régime of the "bake-house" to which they had been assigned for duty.

For Jean, the twelve hours on the quays or under the hangars were a nightmare from which the only delivery lies in awaking. Indeed he only began to live again when once the ranks were dismissed, the overall, pouch, and helmet given up into Chevillard's hands, and he was hastening—he would have liked to run—towards the spot where she was waiting for him.

Andrée used to peep through the window for him, not daring to open it, for fear of the neighbours' blabbing. When she ran to meet him in the passage and threw her arms round his neck, he would laughingly forbid her caresses—"Wait a minute! Let me clean myself up!"

Then quickly casting his tunic aside, he gleefully plunged his head into the basin which Andrée had made ready for him. "What a state you are in, my poor Jeannot!" she exclaimed.

He was almost always splashed with plaster and powdered with oatmeal or rice-flour; and sometimes, most vexatious of all, his face and hands would be entirely blackened with coal-dust. On those days, he deprived himself even of the first kiss—"I'm not fit to touch with the tongs!"

Afterwards when he was refreshed, they would relate to each other their doings of the day. Andrée's days were mortal boredom. With excessive prudence, she rarely risked going out, knowing how illegally prolonged her visit was; for the permit obtained from the obliging Lavigne was valid for only thirty-six hours. Besides, the

country around, glimpsed on the first day, had disappointed her. In vain Jean besought her to go for walks.

"A fig for your walks!" she replied. "It's for you that I'm here!"

He got her some books and waited for his first day of liberty that he might take her to the d'Estignards.

In all that he told his wife of his life at the Port, Jean did not swerve from an assumed cheerfulness. Only half the men were employed in the tents of the "bakery" properly so called. The rest (and Jean was one of them) Adjutant Morinet the dumpy, with his legs like coat-sleeves, handed over in gangs of ten, twenty, or thirty, to his sergeants of the section, their destination being the crushing-mill, the wood fatigue, the wine fatigue, the fodder fatigue, or the coal fatigue. The appointments varied each day. A few cunning ones alone had found out "soft jobs," posts to which they always returned and where some day perhaps, by the grace of heaven, they would be pronounced "indispensables." Such were Dufour the sign painter, whom they had kept busy for months touching up an immense new board for the front of the Textile; and big Geffroy at the "sackeries"; and in the "bread-loading fatigue," three chums whose duties consisted of wattling with wooden laths the truck to be loaded with loaves. Jean had been nominated at first as "sweeper," a job equally choice, because if one did a good lot in

the forenoon and after dinner, one had the chance to come to a rest for most of the afternoon. He excused himself, and had good reason to regret it today when, at the crushing-mill, for example, after ten hours of emptying sacks, his eyes streamed and his throat burned as if it had been skinned.

Andrée, still believing that he was almost always employed as checker or marker, was already becoming rebellious—"It's not the way to treat a man like you!"

If she had known!

Religiously he kept her ignorant of the actual causes of his vexation, for fear of causing her concern and getting himself blamed for—a certain lack of docility. Had she not approved to some extent of what he had written to Chinard?

"He might be useful, all the same. You ought to have treated him carefully!"

"He's no friend, to do what he did!"

"People *are* like that."

"Not always!"

"More of your delusions?"

At all times such discussions indicated their contrasting natures. He was impulsive and generous, always inclined to believe well, always astounded in the face of evil. She was infinitely more mistrustful, thanks to the harsh lessons of her youth. But this time, Jean was tempted to yield to pessimism. "It's true that the world is tainted!" he said.

His friends were so much to him, and he had

lost the best. Auguères was in danger; and now Chinard, one of the last to survive. Chinard, in whose unlimited and devoted affection he had always believed as in his own! When his wife had accused Chinard of a certain secret stiffness, how often Jean had repeated, "You don't know him!"

So now, it was she who was right. "Another of his delusions," yes! Must he then forego every one of the heart's warm impulses and banish friendship from his life? Perhaps! In that case, chilled and embittered, Jean swore to renounce hypocrisy completely at the same stroke. And to begin with, when Andrée advised him to write again to Chinard, less severely, he answered her with a fierce *non possum*.

CHAPTER II

SECRET TORMENT

DARBOISE had asked Monade, Cazenave, and Lavigne to take coffee with them that evening. Little Véchaud, of the refrigerator, also invited, could not get off, and excused himself.

The guests quickly fell victims to the pleasing charm of their hostess. Lavigne offered to get her an indefinite permit, in case of possible trouble. Cazenave, vaguely abashed, spoke little. It was the adjutant who monopolised the conversation from beginning to end, a pretty woman having the gift of stimulating him, as ugly ones did elsewhere. He poured his nonsense out freely, and sometimes his sallies were on the coarse side. Andrée, quite naturally, kept him or steered him within the bounds of permitted drollery. At the right moment, and taking advantage of the influence she was gaining over him, she put a direct question to him: That "bakery" fatigue would be the death of her husband; couldn't they change it for him? She appealed to his great influence— Monade put on airs of importance: "Nothing would seem impossible, dear madame, if it was to give you

pleasure. I have an idea—" Old Lepec was going away, and that meant a place vacant in the sanitary fatigue party. Apparently Fauvel would not oppose it. "I should make it a personal matter."

"And the captain?"

"Papa Meunier? What does he count for!"

They sharpened their wits on the old man. You dare to take him away from his fishing! As for those souvenirs of cartridges and shells, those parcels of copper that he went begging for all over the place and adding to his collection, my word, he must be going to sell them again!

"To the Boches!" Cazenave interjected, a sally which raised laughter.

The adjutant went on: "My friend Darboise, your change happens in the nick of time, because very shortly the boys take the night turn at the bakery!"

The conversation swung this way and that. They talked of Jean's home, newly established, whose happiness the war had come to disturb, of Jean's two campaigns, and the baby born in the interval.

The jolly face of the adjutant turned again to Andrée: "Surprising! So young as you are, Madame Darboise, and already a mother! It's surprising!"

He told the story of his own wife, whose first child was born less than eight months after their marriage, and who had grown over twenty pounds fatter with each of the three following ones.

Andrée handed benedictine around—it was a jolly evening! They lingered, enjoying the sweetness of a home. Towards ten o'clock the three cronies took their leave, and fell over each other in thanks and compliments.

At quarters next day Monade pinched Jean and whispered to him: "This little Darboise! His wife seems to be settling down there for a bit!"

Not once in those ten days had Jean seen Germaine again. Even while confessing to himself that he did miss her a little, he was infinitely grateful to her for her voluntary self-effacement. He intended to give them a passing call, and take some sweets for the little ones.

That evening, as he was finishing his toilet after returning from work, Andrée suddenly said to him: "Oh, guess whom I've met!"

"What do you mean?"

"Your old landlady."

"Mademoiselle Vandenbücke?"

"No, the last one."

"There were two; the old one or the young one?"

"The young one."

"Well! Where was that?" He plunged his head into the basin, a shiver running down his back. Andrée went on:

"She came for the washing. Madame Mafranc told me it was understood that you would keep up the custom."

"Yes, that's so——"

"But didn't you tell me," Andrée asked, "that you'd fallen out? I found her very pleasant, on the contrary."

He was wiping his face: "I was speaking of the old one, whose temper——"

"You were all right with the other one?"

"Oh, yes, all right——"

"By-the-bye"—Andrée got up—"she's got to come back, the washing wasn't ready just then; I must be seeing about it."

The information had a sinister ring for Darboise. From that moment, secret torment gripped him. In vain he tried, while she emptied the linen-basket, to put her on another scent by relating some incident of the day. A certain nervousness was apparent at the outset, and she noticed it: "Is there—have there been any rows yonder?"

"No, no! But the non-coms., they're so stupid!"

"There is something, then, really?"

"Nothing at all!" Weary of the part he was struggling to play, he suddenly feigned a headache.

"Why didn't you tell me?" She hastened to bring him a tablet and a little water, which he drank to oblige her. Changing the subject, he acknowledged a matter of anxiety—the question of money; he could see himself forced to send word to the Crédit Lyonnais to sell—and at what a loss!—one or two of his shares, his last! If the war went on, how were they going to live next year?

His nerves were tense all the while he talked, as

he listened for the least sound outside, for at any second it might be——

The gate to the street opened. He recognised a light foot-fall, and the rubbing of a basket against the wall. At once he complained that his headache was much worse.

Madame Mafranc appeared: "They've come back for the washing, madame."

Andrée showed her the bundle. "Will you count it with her—close by? You can make out a little list. But no—" she changed her mind—"Let me see her, so that I can explain to her about the pleats in my chemisette."

Darboise let her go. She turned back and said: "Haven't you anything to say to her?"

"Pooh! Why should I?"

But impelled by a desire to put a bold front on it, he left his armchair and followed her.

Germaine was standing by the door. She had come without her hat on purpose, in her modest little serge dress. But in natural coquettishness she had hung round her neck a gold chain—a wedding present—that supported a slender Flemish cross.

"Well, Madame Trousselier!" said Jean, with artificial jollity, "how are things going with you?"

"Not so badly, Monsieur J——"

She had nearly said, "Monsieur Jean," and blushed. Her cruel lover was bitterly angry with her for it. Fortunately, Andrée broke in: "Shall we count it together?"

Nimbly Germaine dropped on one knee, opened the bundle and began to call the items, one by one, while Andrée, standing, wrote them in a notebook. It was an interminable minute for Jean. It hurt him to see his friend in that servile attitude; while, Andrée, wrapped up in a muslin dressing-gown seemed of so different a race! It was overwhelmingly obvious that one only of those two beings could inspire love in a man like himself. And this wish dominated everything else—that the disaster had not happened!

Now it was the turn of Madame Mafranc to interpose, busily. Grateful to the young woman who had procured her the windfall of a little household to harbour, she was very glad to say a good word for her: "Oh, Madame can be quite easy about the pleats in her chemisette—Madame Trousselier is very industrious!" Then, wishful to put right what she feared was a fib,—“Oh, of course, in ordinary times, she has no need to do this!”

Germaine was tying up the bundle, and put it then into her basket. Andrée asked politely: "Have you any children, madame?"

Germaine blushed again and seemed to be about to leave it to Jean, who answered, with a forced smile: "Two fine children, yes."

Germaine grew suddenly bolder: "And you have one, I think, madame?"

"Yes, one."

"Who—who has just been ill?"

"Oh, you knew?"

"Is that why—you didn't bring him?"

"Familiar too soon!" thought Jean, with a sore heart. He explained: "I used to have a chat with these ladies now and then; they were interested in you."

His tone, which he tried to make playful, sounded curiously false. And the situation became obscurely strained—this man between these two women, both of them young, both attractive, both of them wrapped up in him. Without going so far as suspicion, Andrée felt something like physical constraint. She looked at her husband and at the intruder in turn, without finding a word to say.

Germaine stood there too, her head slightly bowed in an attitude of indecision. It was Madame Mafranc, the only one at her ease, who "carried on": "It was nice, Monsieur Darboise, lodging with these ladies?" Jean saw the impasse—why, then, had he left them?

"It was too far," he asserted.

"Certainly, yes," the landlady said.

There was a renewed silence; then in a rather peremptory tone, Jean said: "Well, Madame Trousellier, you will remember me to the little ones?"

Humbly Germaine picked up her basket: "Thank you, Monsieur Jean. My mother-in-law told me to give you—wished to be remembered to you." She hesitated; then awkwardly she

shook hands all round, and it hurt Jean almost to the point of crying out.

When she had gone, Darboise made a sign of weariness—"This headache! I can hardly stand up for it."

"You must go to bed."

"After dinner."

The meal was a gloomy one. Jean hardly touched the fried soles—a surprise for him. He was not in form, he said; and he pretended that the gaslight hurt his eyes.

"A little fever, I'm sure," she said compassionately; "you mustn't go out tomorrow."

He shook his head—yes, he was forced to go. For Monade knew she was there—"and he's already chaffing me about you."

"But if the major considers you ill——"

"I'm not anxious for him to come here."

When they rose from the table, in a motherly way Andrée made him undress and go to bed at once: "Go to sleep, my Jean." Using a newspaper as a lamp-shade, she said: "It won't worry you if I read a little while?"

"Not in the least."

She put the paper down several times to dab his forehead with eau-de-Cologne. But, in no way sleepy, he kept turning over.

"You're restless, my poor ducky!" She came and sat down by him and put the tapering fingers of her cool hands on his forehead. "That's doing me good," he murmured. She looked at him

fondly. But it seemed as if a mutual intuition had passed from eye to eye, and just as he felt and feared it, she remarked: "She's—funny, Madame Trousselier."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. Is she always like that?"

With a catch in his throat, he ventured: "What is there special about her?"

"I don't know—she's just funny!" After a silence, Andrée said lightly: "Tell me—you didn't make love to her?"

He smiled—a shrivelled smile that was more like a grin or a gape, a resemblance supported by the gesture of pain that went with it—"I feel bad in my brain-box, you know," he said.

"Do you swear you didn't?"

"Just don't I!"

"Say, 'I swear it.'"

"I swear it!" He uttered the words half-jokingly, yet seeking to attain the tone of vehement truthfulness.

"She isn't pretty," Andrée went on.

This comment hurt him, but he strove not to let it appear. Lightly he replied: "Oh, at St. Pol, she's one of the best!"

There was nothing in Andrée's face seeming to indicate that she was taking the matter in earnest. Yet, a few minutes later, she went up and leaned over him—"My Jeannot, you haven't been unfaithful to me?"

He held out both hands to her, in a movement

which counterfeited the ardour of an affectionate reproach: "Andrée, don't say things like that!"

"Oh," she said, suddenly loving, "your hands are burning, my little love!" She kissed his forehead in caressing purity. Jean congratulated himself that she would forget, in that gleaned moment of happiness, even the subject of her fears. Not at all. On the contrary, a secret trouble taking gradual shape in her heart, she said: "You know what I'm like, eh? That I could never forgive that."

He looked at her steadily, with a slight and bantering shake of his head which meant, "Poor incorrigible darling!" Andrée repeated:

"Not *that*. There are lots of women who don't think it so important. But *I* should think it just as serious, just as monstrous, on your part as on my own."

She said these words slowly, firmly yet gently. By way of reassuring her, *he* could only find his eternal smile, that he meant for complete loyalty, and which doubtless looked like it. He feared mysteriously that in the secret depths of his heart she would see the apparition of the other woman, who haunted him in spite of himself.

CHAPTER III

A HOLIDAY

ANDRÉE declared that she had brought luck to the district, for it was a fact that since her arrival, the visits of the Taubes had been less frequent. But acquainted with the danger, she pricked her ears and her heart palpitated at the slightest sound of the siren. The bellowing of ships' sirens in the night made her jump. Jean laughed—"It's nearly always the first bombs that warn you, you know!"

One night in their second week, they had just gone to bed when a big "Boom!" sounded, and Jean started—"This time, that's the real thing!"

They fell together upon the clothes arranged before hand for this contingency. Andrée, who had thrown her big cloak over her shoulders, was urging on Jean, who struggled with the legs of his trousers.

Another bomb, not very far away! Again they were aiming at St. Pol! The siren was not yet sounding; but down in the basement where she was sleeping, Madame Mafranc was giving warning knocks with a broom-handle for their benefit.

They burst into the low cellar, damp and stuffy, where the whole family was heaped up on three pallets—father, mother, and four children, of whom the youngest, a little deaf mute, was the only one asleep, and she filled the room with her innocent snoring. Neither Jean nor Andrée yet knew the man, who usually got back late from his work—he was a weighman at the Port—though they sometimes heard his hoarse and monotonous voice through the walls. Their first glance enlightened them—he had the red and swollen face of the drunkard. One pitied the degenerate children of a shameless father. Ah, alcohol—the plague of this country! Otherwise Mafranc was sometimes amiably disposed. He chattered without ceasing, and deafened them with arguments and assertions. The Zeppelins would not come back—he would answer for that. Then he went on to bawdy songs, stimulated by the presence of Andrée. He sought to get up, and his wife, casting despairing glances at her guests, found it difficult to prevent him, forcibly burying in the bed the shaggy calf he protruded.

As soon as the danger was over, the Darboises went up again. “Well?” said Jean, merrily.

And then Andrée shivered: “Oh, those sirens that go off too late! I shall never be easy again!”

That anxiety seemed to engross her during the following days; and she renewed her suggestion—and found Jean less hostile to it—that he should write again to Chinard, who had not yet replied,

just a flippant and lively note, the note of a friend who has no intention of ceasing to be one.

The holiday so much desired arrived. For a long time they had looked forward to a ramble together. In spite of the disappointing weather, the wind and the grey sky of autumn, they took the tram for Malo-Terminus. They could not, en route, lower the windows and lean out to enjoy the landscape, for the dusty blasts threatened to tear Andrée's veil off. Alighting in front of the huge hotel surrounded by trembling motor-cars—Army Corps Headquarters—they went forward along the shore.

The deserted immensity gave an impression of melancholy, and one's gaze lost itself in a mist which dulled surfaces and drowned lines. On the Dunkerque side there were just two far-off silhouettes of fisherwomen and three courageous bathers, probably English, dressing again. The horizon was pale and void. Conscientiously Jean and Andrée went forward on the damp sand, their heels sinking in, as far as the waves whose ripples died on the featureless shore. Andrée pressed close to Jean's arm—"We were to have gone to the seaside, you remember!"

Yes, that was in their plans for the end of the summer of 1914—a hope slain with the others. And in this summer of 1916, did any one still talk of holidays, of any of the things that make up the charm of life?

They took the tram again, and stopping at Malo,

went to see the d'Estignards. Again Jean welcomed the friendly atmosphere of that household. His delight, above all, was in the reception accorded to Andrée. Sylvaine shone with gladness. She led her cousin away at once into the garden, and when they re-appeared they already held each other round the waist and talked as if they had always been friends.

"How long shall we have you?" asked the young girl.

"Twelve days yet, perhaps a fortnight."

"No longer?"

"You see—I'm taking liberties with the regulations."

"Oh, if it's only *that!*"

Monsieur d'Estignard offered to make a longer stay easier for her. Andrée thanked him warmly—but there was her little Momo, too, whom she could not leave too long. And yet—she turned to Jean—perhaps she might take advantage——!

"Of course, dearest," he said, "if it wouldn't be running risks."

They talked about the offensive, which had been in full swing for four days. Naturally there was no news yet of the little assistant-surgeon. Darboise could not help speaking of Auguères, and mention of his friend's danger led him to recall those who had disappeared—"Claude Boucheron, alas, the other week!" But it rather vexed him to find that in this provincial circle, the name had little effect.

When tea was served, the old lady gently monopolised her little cousin, and there followed a long duologue in which they reviewed all the family history.

At last Sylvaine was begged to sing, and complied, Andrée venturing in the part of accompanist. Jean appreciated her fine tone, serious and impassioned.

On both sides the friendship sprang up as suddenly as a thunderstorm. Two days later, Andrée lunched at Primrose Villa. It was a reciprocal attraction. They pressed her to come again as often as possible—why, was not every day free to her? Quickly she acquired the habit of going to Malo almost every afternoon.

Jean looked on the intimacy with deep satisfaction, delighted for his wife to have this diversion. When she returned in the evening, Andrée could not stop singing the praises of Sylvaine—"Such a nice nature! So simple and so refined! Much more intelligent than her parents! The real mistress of the house. What a perfect wife she would make!"

"How old do you think she is?"

"Twenty-four. She told me so the other day."

"No idea of marriage on the way?"

Andrée had thought she detected the sadness of premature widowhood, and one day Sylvaine had told her all. Yes, she had become engaged in July, 1914, to a young barrister at Douai, whom she was going to marry in October. He went away

the second day of mobilisation, was killed at Roye on September 30th, and she had worn mourning eighteen months.

Darboise understood now the expression of infinite distress which often darkened the forehead of the young girl who was born for happiness: "Will she marry now?"

Andrée shook her head: "Who knows? I think she still feels it very keenly. And then, her parents and she herself must be very hard to please. They would insist on some distinction, and after the war, you know, you won't find husbands on every bush!"

"Do you know whom I've thought of for her?"

"Auguères, probably?"

"Exactly."

The pretty plan made them smile. A charming couple, yes, to steer into acquaintance and happiness! Good old Auguères! They had just been reassured in regard to his lot. Promoted for the second time, he had scribbled them an affectionate card. In his answer, Jean slipped in a fraternal allusion to the delightful little sweetheart—the lucky dog!—whom they were keeping for him.

Andrée refused for a long time the honour of having her cousins at St. Pol, excusing herself on the ground of the modesty of their lodging. But Sylvaine insisted, and a date was fixed.

The d'Estignards, who were expected at two o'clock, did not arrive till three: "You're late, naughty people!"

"We've been having adventures!"

They had been given the wrong direction upon alighting from the tramcar and had wandered at random for some time. "If we hadn't happened on a sergeant who knows Jean——!"

"Really?"

"A nice boy. And he knew us, too!"

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, he noticed us when we were saying good-bye to your husband at a concert three weeks ago. Since then, we've seen him there every Saturday. He salutes us religiously."

"Sylvaine has made a conquest!" laughed Madame d'Estignard.

"What's his name?"

"We'll ask Jean."

"Do you know," said Andrée comically, "that I had a little affair yesterday in the tram, with a most assiduous suitor!" An officer, who ogled her, she related with amusement. When she got out at Malo, he followed her, and had tried to accost her three times—"The nuisance is, that I believe he's my husband's lieutenant!"

The portrait she drew was exactly that of Fauvel as Jean had described him to her.

"You told Jean then? He must have laughed!"

"No, I didn't; that would vex him still more."

She had noticed for several days that he was very quiet—the change promised him had not come off. He was still at the "bakery" and the night turn was approaching. "I'll go and see the lieutenant,"

he had told her two days before. And if he had been told of the incident he would have let himself be cut in pieces rather than tempt overtures. She knew her Jean!

Of his real troubles, the worst was his sorrow that he could not open his heart to her. And then he was not happy at the Textile, where there were a thousand tribulations—all the worse for the other threat hanging over him!

On the day after Germaine's risky visit, he went to the Rue Gambetta with the intention of lecturing her on her imprudence. He found her alone. She came timidly up to him, and suddenly embarrassed by her presence, he felt obscurely offended that she only offered him her hand.

Then she forestalled him and began blaming herself. She felt that she had acted foolishly the night before, that he had not been pleased, and was angry with her. She was still angrier with herself. In face of her contrition, it was Jean who, seized with remorse, persuaded her not to exaggerate the seriousness. Then, brightening up perhaps too quickly, either sincerely or acutely, she sang the praises of Andrée—"How much nicer she is than—than her photo! How she makes me feel—ugly, by the side of her!"

The subject embarrassed Darboise, and he turned it aside: "And your mother-in-law—what's she like?"

"She fumes because you don't lodge with us."

"Well! As long as I pay just the same——"

“How—you’re paying?”

He explained that he had promised to do it the other day; and he should keep his word, although the burden of double rent——

Germaine stopped him. “But I don’t want that at all!”

“My dear——”

“Nor my mother-in-law, either!”

“Well, I insist——”

“When you’ve come back here, then, perhaps——”

He was wondering secretly if he would really go back there after Andrée’s departure in twelve days. He had resolved to break away gently. He went on: “You understand, I don’t want your mother-in-law to be able to reproach me.”

“Oh, it’s not for that that she’s angry.”

“Why then?”

“Some stupid talk!”

Puzzled, he pressed her, but did not succeed in discovering the truth behind her reticence. The key turned in the lock; it was the old woman coming in.

At sight of Darboise she stopped dead on the threshold. With steady eyes and a hard expression she stared at him for some seconds.

He, putting a bold front on it, went up to her and held out his hand: “How goes it, Madame Trousselier? I’ve just called to say good-day to you.”

“Are you going to keep the ground floor—yes

or no?" she launched out, without taking his hand.

"Why, yes, I'm keeping it, since I shall certainly be—your lodger again."

Germaine interposed: "I was telling him that he mustn't pay while he's not here. Likely as not we shouldn't have been able to let it again——"

"He mustn't pay!" the old woman burst out; "is some one going to pay us an income then? Isn't it enough already that he's dropped us for the Mafrancs? 'He mustn't pay!' That seems quite easy to you! Because he'll come back 'perhaps'? If he didn't come back, you might whistle for some one to take the rooms now!"

Jean ventured: "There's no reason why you should be short of civilians!"

"Do you think so?"

"What's changed?"

She looked him up and down evilly: "It's this way—my son's house used to have a good reputation."

Strangely uneasy, he understood that he had got to stand up for himself: "And why should it not have that now, madame?"

"That's enough!" Without another word she took refuge in her room, angrily banging the door.

"Well! What does she know? What does she want?"

"Nasty beast!" murmured Germaine through her teeth. "To begin with, they're making her excited——"

"Who are?"

She refused to say; and as he got angry in his turn and cried that he was sick of it all, that all these mysterious tricks bored him to death, she resumed her cajoling tone: "Don't get cross about it, darling—I'll explain to her—I'll answer for it that it'll be all right."

He left her, discontented with himself and with her. He had not persuaded her to accept the thirty-five francs.

"I should throw it in the canal!" she threatened.

"So shall I!" But it was a sum that mattered to him now.

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Several days of lull followed. The horizon seemed to clear and Darboise's optimism was quick to take the upper hand.

One evening, however, after dinner, when he had gone out with Andrée, and had just ventured, at the beginning of the dunes, to take her arm, whom should they meet but two women, standing and chatting, who leered at them impudently. They were Madame Trousselier and Mademoiselle Vandembücke. Did they know each other, too! Jean could not pass without saluting them, but they made no response.

"Who are they?" Andrée asked; "I often meet those two together; they eye me as if they had something against me."

"The old woman is my former landlady, you know, the one I was telling you about——"

"The mother of the woman who came for the washing?"

"Her mother-in-law."

Andrée did not persist, being devoid of suspicions. He hurried her along with a brisk step, to hide his uneasiness.

CHAPTER IV

A GRIEVANCE

ANDRÉE was accomplishing her ends. She had induced Jean to draw up a draft of a letter to Chinard; four pages of lively stuff, in which a description of the humorous side of life at Dunkerque was finished off with one or two expressions of cordial friendliness. And Andrée, whose return was drawing near—her husband, haunted by vague fears, dared not take it on him to detain her—proposed to go and call again on Paulette Dartigues, as soon as ever she got back.

That afternoon was signalised by a lively alarm.

It was just one o'clock when the siren hurled forth its fitful howling. Then one after another, dull explosions sounded, four, five, six.

Andrée went to her window and saw the enemy aeroplanes—three Taubes, that had come up behind the shelter of a cloud—making off again, followed by the little smoke-clouds of shells. In the street, several gossips were nodding their heads with a knowing air—"Right on the Port!"

Where Jean was! In anguish, Andrée ventured

to question them. What did they know—had they seen anything?

As the women replied only vaguely, she went out to make inquiries. Groups were forming. She mingled in them, but they looked at her unkindly. Not far away, Mademoiselle Vandembücke was jogging her neighbours with her elbows and pointing out to them the Parisienne, and they looked at her with an injured air. But little did Andrée care. She thought she heard a passer-by say: "It's on the Textile!" She ran and accosted two youths, who laughed in her face.

In the deepest uneasiness she went in again. Madame Mafranc, seeking to reassure her, made some alarming observations: the Textile, bless us! was a very big place, but still there was no doubt it was marked. Andrée could stand no more and put her hat on: "That's the worst of it, I'm going to see——"

"Mind—they won't let you pass!"

And indeed, when she had crossed the dunes, a sentry suddenly appeared and barred her road. She bewildered him with her arguments and almost convinced him, but the sergeant seemed to be a churl, and was barely polite to her. She had the daring to appeal to an officer who was leaving the Intendance building, a captain. He, by contrast, was quickly over-courteous. She would have liked to snub him, but was too much afraid of having to show her papers. He offered to accompany her and show her round the Port. She declined the

invitation and went back, content with the definite statement that the six bombs failed in their object.

She was calm by evening and ran smiling to meet Jean: "Did you imagine—what a state I was in at midday?"

"What about?"

"About you."

"Well, there was no need!" he said.

Darboise dropped into an arm-chair. His depressed look struck her: "What's the matter? What have they done to you?"

"The dirty devils!"

"What about them?"

"It wasn't their fault that they didn't get us all done in!"

"How's that?"

He narrated the hateful scene. He was in a "wood fatigue" today, and they were mustered in ranks to resume work—in ranks, a vexatious fancy of Dubus!—when the Taubes were announced. When the first bomb exploded in their neighbourhood, on the breakwater, a slight panic seized them and they were making for the shelters when the adjutant bawled: "By God, there are no shelters for you! I forbid you to stir! Let the first man that I catch taking his hook beware!"

The power of an officer! Though every man's life was concerned, there were just three, Gauthier Charles, Thuillier, and himself, who disobeyed and fled to the dug-outs made by the English, who gave

them shelter. "What a mess, too, when they got back!"

"I promise you," said Jean, "it had very nearly been something villainous. Dubus called Thuillier a coward, and he might have called *me* that!"

"Come now," said Andrée gently, "at least he didn't punish you?"

"Not just then—he couldn't. He was in the wrong. His order was right against the garrison regulations. Only——"

"Only what?"

"All the rest of the day, he was trying to be revenged—to catch us—all three of us. It's always easy to do. Every time we stopped to breathe a second, he flew at us with his 'by Gods!' And in the end he's reported us, it seems."

Andrée could hardly believe there could be such ferocious stupidity: "But what sort of work were you doing?"

"The most useless and the most laborious!"

"What exactly?"

"Like most other days."

"You didn't tell me that."

"Ah, if I told you everything!"

Up till then he had disguised the full extent of his unhappiness. Tonight, the flood of indignation was too strong, and carried him away. In a low and yet biting tone, with harsh and thrilling expressions, he began to describe to her what their miserable galley-slave existence was like, when

once they had been handed over in the morning to the non-coms. like serfs sold by auction.

Work of the most exhausting kind, and different every day, so that their unfamiliarity with it made it all the more difficult; the sorting and appointment of the men carried on haphazard, without the least regard to their cleverness or their physical fitness. He had himself pleaded his bad arm—but no; no consideration at all! Sometimes he would be yonder at Hangar No. 5, carrying to the wag-gons sacks of oats that weighed over two hundred pounds; sometimes feeding the little trucks for the crushing-mill in an atmosphere saturated with a dust that scorched his throat; sometimes emptying barley and wheat on the floor, so that they could be mixed together, in the hangar which was known as “Russia,” because it froze you in winter and made you catch cold in summer; sometimes in the coal-boats—and what a state she had seen him come back in, two nights running! All these were tasks for beasts of burden, for which he was never intended!

“No, I wasn’t made for it!” Rebelliously, he repeated his eternal grievance, eternally valid, again and again. He had ability, good taste, and the right to be doing something different; he was worth more than that! He, mutilated in the war, who had not spared either devotion or his blood for his country’s sake!

Getting more excited, he said it was not only the severity of such tasks—he might have resigned

himself to that—but the mental atmosphere which prevailed there, that was what exceeded all the rest, that was what stifled one's judgment and exasperated one's temper!

Ah, that wilful bullying, that contempt for the human being! It seemed as though they had taken it on themselves to disgust the men with their work. The harshness of the officers was damnable, and they followed only higher example; from end to end of the ladder, they rivalled each other in stern severity, in paltry and cynical severity. All the services of the depot were compressed within the iron hand of Brigadier Néraudin, a handsome man of forty-four years, who had got two of his stripes and his decoration at Dunkerque. One met him from time to time, either in a motor-car, sweeping the bays with the cruel eyes of a bird of prey, or on foot, cane in hand, booted, gloved, smart, passing by the haggard workers without ever returning a salute. But he was watching them, out of the corner of his eye; and for the least failing—prison, and more prison! He reduced to the ranks a corporal whom he caught sitting. Nothing pleased him so much as to feel the wordless terror that preceded him.

And his subordinates! Carouge, a huge fellow, a greedyguts, who had been adjutant in the regular army and had developed a gift for administration since the war. Puffed up with conceit, he required even the non-coms. to stand at attention while saluting. There was Deludat, too, small

and slender, pale and péevish, who seemed also to be a machine for distributing imprisonment. These two lieutenants were the masters of the Textile, with the two adjutants in the Staff Office, Morinet the persistent bawler, and the silent and dreaded Moulin. From this Staff had proceeded all that series of notices, orders, and service instructions which papered six yards of partition near the hairdresser's shed. The perusal of them was enough to surround one with a sense of alarm, oppression, and humiliation. It bristled with warnings and Draconian vetoes. There was a list, too, renewed every day, of penalties, with the reasons for their infliction; such a one, court-martialled for appropriating a piece of bread; another, eight days' imprisonment "for having stayed twenty minutes at the latrine"—eight days being Deludat's order, automatically changed into fifteen by the brigadier. There were also placarded some muddled instructions for the event of bombardment, and all with the threat of the turnkey—"Any offender whatsoever will be punished with the utmost severity." Punishment, always punishment! Ah, the despots! Deludat's last trick was the notice posted the night before. To prevent the speculation of provisions, which had greatly increased of late, the fatigue parties would have to file past a non-com. with bare heads and their pockets inside out, and this at least twice a week on surprise orders.

“You can imagine the picture! Worse than convicts!”

Jean was boiling: “They’re going too far. Several of us have decided not to submit to it, and whoever proposes to search me, he’ll get a smack on the nose!”

“My Jean——”

Andrée tried to calm him, but he got still hotter: “Yes, but it ought to be made known—by a Press campaign, say—they’d have to take physic then! See, if I get all right with Chinard again, I’ll send him a budget!”

Andrée began to speak, but he went on: “Fancy having men like those for officers! Look at that last notice of Deludat’s! His typist must have played the trick on him of typing it just as it was—full of fantastic spelling mistakes—several to a line—‘material’ with two t’s and two e’s—and all split infinitives! Decante made a copy of it—I’ll show it to you, in his note-book. That’s the gentleman he is—that’s the sort of *pâté* he’s got!”

Still Jean went on. It seemed as if all the accumulated bitterness of his weeks of slavery was overflowing:

“To give you an idea of the folly and maliciousness of those chaps. If only they themselves were qualified for their jobs! But they are the devil! Crass ignorance, unscrupulousness, confusion. And that means unheard-of waste. I told you about the poor beggars sent to quod for pinching a bit of bread? Well, there are three hundred loaves,

at least, spoiled every day, through the actions of those gentlemen."

He recalled several scandals. The sacks of oats, corn, and rice were often burst when brought off the ships and their contents leaked in big jets, yet they were dragged about with no attempt at recovery. Coal was piled up on the quays in such mountains that frequently spontaneous combustion occurred and the firemen had to be summoned. And the absence of real oversight, the squandering, the constant neglect of the elementary laws of health! An example? Why, the fatigue men were forced, after unloading the ships, to scrape the ground and sweep out the waggons, and the filthy residuum they picked up in their shovels—a mixture of flour, dust, coal, and mud, sometimes dung and sometimes dead rats—that was all poured into fresh sacks and tied up and marked and sent off just like the others! That was the way to spread disease! Everywhere the same feeling of carelessness, of management without laws!

By a roundabout way Jean came back to his starting-point.

"They talk of a labour crisis; well, there *is* one here. There are ships losing days and weeks at the quays for want of men to unload them. Look at the loss and the huge demurrages that no one gets any good from! And meanwhile—well, our job today, do you know what it was?"

"The 'wood fatigue,' you said?"

"Yes, this morning Morinet sent forty of us

to find Dubus. 'Nothing doing,' growled Dubus. The sergeant suggests taking us back—they were short of men at the 'refrigerator.' 'Shut your jaw,' says the other; 'who's consulting you? *I'll find them a job!*' He shows us a towering heap of logs. 'That's not in the right place; stack it again for me, six yards farther off.'"

Such was the exhausting work that had occupied them all day. Giraud had been hurt in the leg by the sudden fall of a heavy log and had been taken to hospital.

As Andrée now rebelled in her turn, Jean went on: "It seems incredible to you? It's every day alike, and the chaps are used to it. When they're going to the wood fatigue they say jestingly, 'There'll be some more piles of wood to shift, so that we can sweep underneath.' Anywhere you find the same idiotic ideas. Why, for two months there's been a party of thirty chaps who do nothing whatever but destroy the shelters and build them again close by."

"But why isn't it all known?"

"All those people stick together. The brigadier stands well 'at Court.' He shields the people round him on condition that they grovel before him. Inspections? The archdodgers! Why there was a Parliamentary Committee came some time ago, and they had eight days' notice of it. They began by tearing off certain posters which prescribed that the men were to go on working during air-raids as if nothing was happening,—are we of

the fighting service? Then, since it was rather a quiet time, and some of the men had been idling for a few weeks, they organised a pretty comedy. A hundred men were collected by the tubs of smoked herrings, and as soon as the blast of a whistle announced the official arrival—'Now, get to work!'—and the fellows start chucking the tubs into each other's hands. A superbly picturesque effect! The M.P.'s were astounded, and congratulated the brigadier. One of them, when he got back to Paris, told a Minister about the activity of the service, and so, a week later, it had to be done all over again, and the barrels put where they were before, for the benefit of the Army cinema!"

Jean laughed, but there was exasperation in his laughter: "Tell me, darling, don't you think one has good reason to be disgusted?"

"And that report against you three, do you think it's serious?"

Well! In that matter, he declined to be worried yet. Perhaps it was an empty threat, seeing it was based on such unfairness. No matter! The one thing certain was that he was "fed up"—fed up with all the management!

"Well then, what next?"

She jumped at the conclusion to which he was coming and the disagreeable news which *she* had for him froze on her lips. He went on: "It's all very well to let things go on and to go where you're sent, but there's a limit to everything. They've

disheartened me, and the only thing I dream about now is to hide away in a little quiet corner until the end of the war."

"Will that be long, do you think?"

"What?"

"The war?"

"Years! No end in sight. The governments on both sides have messed it in."

"But," she objected timidly, "it's going well on the Somme?"

"Going well? Do you think it's going well?"

Sarcastically he drew up the balance-sheet of the first three weeks of the offensive. What losses and what a paltry advance! The effect of surprise miscarried, the British stopped at once, the equivalent of what the battle of Verdun had been for the Boches! A pretty take-in, such success!

He had hardly referred to such subjects as these for a very long time, and though she was quite accustomed to his assurance, she was surprised to hear him argue in this tone of bitterness. "It looks as if some one had been slyly stirring you up!"

Her intuition was right—the pernicious influence of Decante! But Jean almost got angry: "Can you prove me wrong on a single point?"

"No, you're right," she admitted. She was inclined to share his vexation and disgust. Content that he had convinced her, he went on, and his tone became suddenly gentler and more affectionate:

"My little darling, my Andrée—you're the only one that can get me out of it."

"How?"

She saw what was to come, and grieved for the delusion she would have to shatter.

"You're going back," he said.

"Are you going to send me away?"

She smiled at him. As a matter of fact her leaving was decided on; after all, they had been together nearly a month, after counting only on twenty days!

"I want you," he continued, "to go and call on Paulette Dartigues the very next day after Chinard has received——"

At the name of Chinard she raised her head and murmured with an effort: "There's—there's an answer from him."

She looked for the letter on the table, and handed it to him. He had no thought of taking offence that she had opened it,—a habit which had the sanction of their mutual trust. But her silence about the letter till now froze him with apprehension: "Well! What does he say?"

She watched him for the few seconds that it took him to run through the letter. Chinard acknowledged the receipt of Jean's long letter which, he said, he had that minute received. (He had just got back from the Balearic Islands, where he had had to go with a geographical commission.) What could he say? He was very busy. He apologised, he apologised profoundly, for his candour;

another time, he would be hypocritically laudatory. All the same, if there was one person who ought not to have taken offence at his attitude, it was his friend Jean, himself so infatuated with sincerity! Enough of that subject! He could only sympathise deeply, if it was his loneliness that was making him so bitter. He preferred not to say anything more and he ended: "Yours very truly."

Darboise whistled. In every sentence he perceived the sarcasm of disdainful superiority. He kept the letter in his hand and with a grin said: "Perfect!"

He tried to find some ironical observation, but it did not come. His eyes wandered to the mirror. There he saw himself as he was, in his working-clothes and that poor and ugly background, with the gloomy prospect of morrows like today, and he despaired of himself. An outcast! A vanquished man!

Andrée followed the working in his face of this self-deception. She went up to him silently, but he kept her off, rather roughly: "Wait! I'm too filthily dirty!"

But she overpowered his resistance and gave him her fresh and sweet caress: "But *I* love you like that, my poor dear!"

Heedless of the dirt and perspiration that stained him, she kissed him lingeringly, and he felt the supreme purity of his wife's affection.

"You've got me; we have each other," she said.

"There now! I've made you dirty!"—a mark on the muslin of the dressing-gown!

"It'll wash!" she said playfully, with a smile so glorious that he wanted to fall on his knees and worship her: "How good you are! How I love you!" he sighed.

Leaning the dear head against her shoulder she fondled it: "As long as I have you in my arms, as long as we believe in each other, the world can do nothing against us!"

"All the same, then, tell me——"

She added with energy: "For I've got confidence in you and in myself, in your talent and in the revenge that you'll take——"

"And in my love, too, Andrée?" he said passionately, as her breath fanned his forehead.

"Sometimes, yes," she bantered. Then, very low, as if she dreaded making the confession, or as if she ventured it only in jest, she whispered: "Do you know that, sometimes, I'm afraid you've changed!"

"How changed? Don't say that!"

Instinctively she repeated the expression of the other day: "Ah, if you were ever unfaithful to me——"

"What should you do?"

"I don't want to say; I don't want to think of it." She laughed the little roguish and childish laugh that he was so fond of; and stiffening the clasp of his arm round her supple waist, he held her closely to him, and still more closely: "Closer

still!" she quivered. "Oh, I know that just now you love me!"

Alas! Just at that minute there came again into his memory that other dark and threatening scene of the day before, when he had gone to pay his month's rent to Madame Trousselier. The old woman had refused the money—"We're not beggars at least"—and had sent him away with mutterings of treachery.

Ah, the tragic impasse into which fate was driving him! He knew too well that in this increasing trouble whose shadow was rising darkly above his life, one light only remained to him, one only protecting deity—his wife, the chosen being; and to think that he was trying to bring it about that she should go away in a few days! Pitiful inconsistency!

BOOK VI

CHAPTER I

AT THE FIRING-GROUNDS

DAYLIGHT was dawning, dirty and grey. It had rained all night, and the downpour still spread itself as though its resources were unlimited, splashing on the tiled roofs and turning the muddy roads into marshes. But half awake, the men were dragging themselves along in column of four; and murmurs were arising: "My God, what a life!" "This was my rest-day!" Over all ran the complaint—"And all this for the auxiliary men!"

Common talk accused the new Governor of a desire to be zealous. Had it come from him, this ridiculous idea of drilling with the rifle the very men who were exempted by law from carrying it? Or must it be ascribed to the stupidity of his subordinates?

Their shoddy great-coats were pierced through by the falling rain. The pouches in which each man carried a hunch of bread were saturated. Jean felt the water beating on the back of his neck and

trickling down his shoulder-blades; and his old boots were leaking.

They had entered Dunkerque and were marching in step, rifle on shoulder, along the still lifeless streets. A little beyond the Rosendael Gate, they halted. The gate was locked and no one answered their summons. Fauvel then questioned the adjutant: "Didn't you let the musketry sergeant know?"

"I didn't think we were coming here, lieutenant!"

Fauvel shrugged his shoulders—as long as everybody was playing the fool! One felt that he was in the wrong. Sergeant Gandolphe was sent to find the key.

For a long time they stood under the torrent, in front of the wall. Fauvel, wrong side out, was chewing his moustache. Jean, who proposed to approach him and get an answer about the "sanitary fatigue," concluded that the moment was not opportune.

They had piled arms, and Darboise wandered from group to group. Some of the younger men waited in stoical resignation. Little Navarro said to Jean: "It's a tiring job, to stand on your legs!" He was a lad of twenty, whose squad-book mentioned "chronic bronchitis." He had high colour in his cheek-bones; he was getting thinner; he was exhausted by nightly sweats; he was going off rapidly, and no one cared.

Decante, Thuillier, and Clément were talking,

hooded by the waterproofs they were lucky enough to have: "Wretched do, this! When they might have left us snoozing!"

"Ah, it's what they've arranged, you see!"

"If only there was some rest to follow, by and by!"

"What do *you* think! Hard graft, when we get back!"

"You talk about lunacy, their firing practice!"

"Is there anything intelligent one *can* see?"

Jean drew near. Clément was telling a story he had got from a motor-driver friend:

"They got a fright the other day. You know the Corps has just changed generals?"

"That's right. It's C——'s father, now!"

"A note from him, at parade, announces that on such a day at such a time, his own orderly staff officer will come to inspect all the motor-cars of the Corps. D'you know how many there are? Six hundred."

"And then?"

"Talk about a disturbance! The story goes that he'll catechise all the drivers and find out if the cars are in order. Bussièrès, the fiddler, begins to look for his 'bus, that he's never yet seen. Three days of rubbing and polishing——"

"That did no harm!"

"On the appointed day, the officer comes along—a little yellow chap, a cocky nobody, like they all are at H. Q. Do you know what it amounted to, their wonderful inspection? To making a

list of the 'buses that had no straps on, you know."

"Straps what for?"

"Because the general, it seems, has got rheumatism. He fancies himself in motors, and he wants to be able to catch hold of any old car that comes along."

"How much will that foolery cost?" asked Decante, softly.

"Three or four hundred, at fifteen francs apiece!"

"And who'll pay for it?"

"*We* shall."

"Ah," said Thuillier, "like the place where H. Q. settled down at Malo-Terminus. They'd nearly finished it, you remember, and it's a funny thing if it hadn't cost five thousand francs——!"

"And then some!"

"C——'s father arrives. He found fault with the situation on sight, and his first action was to rent the nobbiest villa in Rosendael. Another removal and another settling down; you can guess what the 'unforeseen expenses' were!"

"And they say he'll not go mouldy here."

"There'll be a third, and he'll change again!"

"That's where our poor old brass goes!"

They looked at each other, and their eyes gleamed with sarcastic bitterness. With their mothers' milk these men had imbibed a rude instinct of equality; and nothing galled them more (unless it were the unbridled arrogance of

these petty tyrants who surpassed those of ancient days), than this naboblike pomp, this prodigality with which they scattered the savings of simple folk whose horizon showed them only ruin and wretchedness.

Other men had come in for the end of the story, and at once set themselves to go one better. Delamarre was in revolt against the supplementary rations assigned to officers: "Have they got four stomachs?"

Clément then proceeded to backbite the flying men. He had a grudge against all the lot of them, since his girl, they said, had been enticed away by a famous crack.

"Those are chaps, now, that play ducks and drakes with everything!" He quoted incredible instances. Petrol, now; they knew the price of it! Well, at the aviation camp when they were making their "juice" in the morning, didn't they go and put the stove to heat up on the top of a bucket that contained two or three gallons? In the same way, too, for the flares that had to mark by night the four corners of the alighting-ground—they found it more convenient now to set fire to big drums, with men taking it in turns to pour in the petrol wholesale.

At last Gandolphe reappeared with the chief artificer. Awakened in a bad temper, he declared that he had not been warned of their coming—and this was the day for the Customs men to shoot!

Fauvel was unwilling to yield, and referred to

the order he had received the day before. In his heart he was beginning to see that he had made a mistake. The note said, "at the firing-ground." That was away yonder, near the Western Defence. No matter; his tabs made it certain that he could never be wrong, and aloud he blamed an orderly, and promised him a wiggling.

Otherwise, and as long as they were there—So the men were taken in groups of four to the butts, and the practice began. Beside each group a non-com. stood, but not too near, because—Depussay warned his comrades—with such ancient weapons one had to look out for bursts.

Most of the men were quite unfamiliar with this '74 rifle. A few crippled men objected, or showed themselves unable to shoulder and work it. Nourion, the sinister giant, was one of these, and compliance was not insisted on in his case. The rest were startled by the weapon's violent recoil and the flame that streamed from the barrel. No one understood its sights. The adjutant gave some advice which was found to be incorrect. The marking was defective and ranging impossible. Besides, a heavy smoke soon rose and cut off their view.

Jean had "passed" among the first. He was waiting, as he tramped up and down in the mud, for the right moment to approach the lieutenant, who was at last found alone, having finished a joke with Dezelée the locksmith. Darboise went up to him, but just as he opened his mouth, Fauvel said:

"I say! You're the man I was wanting a chat with! It's serious, this about you!"

"What is it about, lieutenant?"

"There's—a complaint against you, at the Textile."

"How's that?"

"Don't pretend to be surprised. You can't be unaware that there's a report against you."

"Official?"

"Up to the present, there's only a semi-official note handed me by Adjutant Moulin. But—" he nodded his head—"I'm wondering if I must not show it to the captain, in which case you'll find yourself in a pretty mess!"

Jean wanted to shout at him—"Do what you like! Give me away!" but he controlled himself, and bit his lips: "And this note—what does it say?"

"It's about your little affair at the wood fatigue. It's annoying, you know! It was a big blunder on your part!"

Darboise had an intuition that Fauvel would arrange the matter. Not a bad devil, at bottom! To enable him to judge, Jean told him about the scene at the bombardment, and the anger and malevolence of Dubus. He warmed to his subject, and his plea seemed to him so powerful and so just that the other would be obliged to change his tune.

Nothing of the sort. When he had finished, the lieutenant said:

"You must understand that I can't go into all that quibbling. It pays *us*, you know, to be on good terms with the Textile, and with such goings-on as yours—ah, no! The captain won't pass that over easily!"

"Then—you're going to let him know?"

"I don't know. It's a serious matter. I shall see. It will depend on how things are looking. But if Moulin comes in the end to rebuke me for not doing anything——"

Darboise understood that the man had no other object than to torment him with these hypocritical menaces. That was his nature, quite. Was *he* developing scruples, when it was known that he did as he pleased with the detachment and paid no attention to the "old man"? And what value did Moulin set on that bit of paper?

With an air of indifference, the lieutenant went on: "Another matter—I think you'll not be able to sleep in the town any longer."

"Are there—some new regulations?"

"Nothing absolutely definite yet. You understand that it won't come from me. I don't care a damn. But it seems that the governor is going to sign a strict order. I'm telling you this," and he winked at Jean, "because—you are interested." As Jean pretended to be unmoved, he went on: "You've got your wife there. Don't deny it; I know. I've seen her. For that matter, everybody knows. You make yourself noticed with

her." He whistled. "So if trouble comes your way over it, well——!"

Turning on his heels, Fauvel left Jean overmastered. Monade was strolling up and down not far away, and he decided to go and sound him: "The lieutenant's been talking to me in a funny way about my wife! Is it true that people are tattling as much as all that?"

The adjutant sniffed awkwardly: "Well, she's been there a long time already, you know, Madame Darboise has. Perhaps she'd do best to go. It's a pity the lieutenant knows——"

"He wouldn't sneak on me, all the same?"

"Hum! He doesn't fancy you, and you'd better be careful."

"Would he go as far as that?"

"Just lately, especially. Why, I've spoken to him about you several times for the sanitary fatigue, and he sends me to the right-about—'Darboise? A pretender, a humbug, a little gentleman that wants a lesson'!"

As the men were not returning to the Port till the afternoon, Jean made his escape at lunch-time. In vexation he told Andrée what had happened: his hopes for a change of work, gone; and this Fauvel, another of the ugly devils! "Is it because I didn't bring him here and introduce him to you?"

"Listen," said Andrée, "I'm afraid I've something to do with it." She confessed the tramcar incident, when a lieutenant had noticed her, followed her, and accosted her.

"Tall, thin, clean shaved?"

"That's it!"

Jean had no doubt about it. In a tone of sudden bitterness he said: "It's idiotic! You ought to have warned me!"

He had not accustomed her to that way of speaking, and she rebelled: "I thought I did right; and if you speak to me like that——!"

In the next two rejoinders their voices got higher; there was almost one of the scenes that were so rare between them. They cut it short, but during the whole hour that they had to spend together, a mutual enervation kept them sulky, pouting, warlike.

He was on the point of going. She showed herself the more sensible, as usual, and went to kiss him: "Bad boy! Is that the way to spoil the last moments left to us?"

Quickly disarmed, he smiled on her. He had no one but her. But, repeating to her Monade's advice, he thought he ought to back it. What grief it meant for him! (But the other anxiety was haunting him.) Alas, it was necessary all the same to decide on the day of her going. He would go and see Lavigne tomorrow about the permit.

"Ah, what a hurry you're in!"

"My darling, don't let's begin again!"

But it tore his heart that she, poor love, should see it.

CHAPTER II

SICK LEAVE

THEY had just told Darboise that the captain had sent for him.

Since their interview at the beginning, Jean had avoided even crossing the old man's track. Sent for by him! What new blow was this? He went up to the Bureau. In the next room he could hear Papa Meunier storming against Nivard the orderly—one of his favourites: "*I shall bear you in mind!*" he was shouting: "A nice thing indeed! To let my maggots get eaten up!"

The man was making excuses: "It was that dog that came with the adjutant while I was at the telephone."

"The adjutant? He hasn't been here! Ah, I see, you're tipsy, my friend——"

Nivard had just started to open the door, but he turned round on the insult: "Old ass!" he said, half-aloud, so that the deaf officer would not hear him. Then aloud and angrily: "I'm not tipsy! And even if they *were* eaten, the maggots are mine!"

"Yours? How, yours?"

"Because I bought them and paid for them with my own money."

The captain went crimson: "Aha! You're grousing, are you? You'll have eight days' imprisonment."

Nivard left the room shrugging his shoulders. Stopping in the Bureau, he said to the "chief," who was absorbed in a return: "Drunk, am I? It's a sad business to hear that puppet talk!"

He turned to Jean: "Eight days! I'll be even with him! He'll never dare put them down for me—seeing what I know! The day after I went into the clink, likely he'd go in too!"

The lieutenant appeared: "What are you doing there, Darboise?"

"The captain has sent for me. Is it—for that affair?"

"Don't think so!" Fauvel's gesture was worthy of Pontius Pilate.

The "chief" raised his head: "Go in, Darboise; he's waiting for you."

The captain was seated, and the forehead of his comical old face was wrinkled. When he saw the new-comer, he steadied his eye-glass: "Ah, it's you—the famous young man!" he said, in his always grotesquely nasal tone: "You don't seem to care a damn for me? I've received yet another letter from your friend, Captain Mascard——"

Jean was astounded: "I didn't know—" he began.

"A letter, yes, a letter in which he asks me—I

don't know what—to change your fatigue. It's beginning to annoy me! Does he think I've nothing else to do but answer him? And you? What are you complaining for?"

By a sign Jean conveyed that he was grumbling about nothing. To himself he was wondering how this could have—ah, an idea! It was probably little Véchaud, of the "refrigerator" who, having heard his wish concerning the "sanitary fatigue" thought he would do him a good turn and write to his protector at F——.

The captain started up. The poor fellow was liable to become suddenly uncontrollable, even without apparent provocation, like a vicious horse. Pointing to the door, he said: "Take your damned hook! After what I told you, it's the trick of a churl. Darboise, Jean Darboise, I shall bear you in mind; and the next time I shall not let you off!"

Jean went out, white with anger. The worst of it was that Fauvel gripped him and went out on to the landing with him: "So that's what it is!" He waited a minute: "And if I'd shown him Moulin's note, eh? I'm still a decent sort, eh, eh?"

Darboise, turning whiter, had to thank him as he left—still another sacrifice for Andrée! And she was going away! He would be left alone in the midst of this hostile crowd. He turned dizzy, now and then, as though on the brink of an infernal chasm.

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He had caught cold at that imbecile rifle-practice. The men's hair had been given a "prison crop" on Valentin's disdainful order, and after the catarrh had lasted for three days, with swollen nose and weeping eyes, his delicate lungs began to be affected and he felt sure he was in for it. He woke up one morning with a hoarse cough and a sense of oppression.

And on that day exactly—he went to work in spite of Andrée's protests—almost all of his fatigue party were put on to unloading a cold-storage boat, arrived from Argentina. Pleading his condition, in vain he asked for different employment for that day. Corporal Goguenard offered to take him and refer the matter to the adjutant of the day—Dubus! He did not insist.

What a job this was, too! Divided into teams of four, they had first to lift and stack on their trolley the enormous chunks of meat that the huge steam crane gathered in a net, with a metallic rattling, from the bowels of the ship, kept suspended for a little while, and then dropped on the quay in a shapeless mass. In its wrapping of grey linen, each weighed about two hundred pounds. One could roughly make out, as the hands tightened on them, the feet and the shape of the animals—the sections of calves, the quarters of oxen. It was a horrible task to handle these great bags, covered with an icy glaze, in which there seemed to be mingled a kind of sticky ooze, proceeding from the dead flesh; and the

foetid penetrating smell of stale blood turned one sick.

When the trolley was full, it was pushed to the hoist, which lifted one along with it to the first or second floor. There they stood for a moment in front of the heavy leather curtain which closed the entry to the chambers. This was then drawn aside, and a surly corporal growled, "Quick!"

Darboise was curious when on his first trip he entered these vast rooms which only the humble light of infrequent electric globes pervaded, and where there were twelve degrees below zero of artificial cold. Some of his pals were ranging the quarters of meat along partitioned shelves, and the unfortunate men were freezing where they stood. Unwarned of their destination, and unprovided with warm clothing, they were reduced, between the coming of the trolleys, to stamping their feet, while several older men ran round the room like children. Among others there, Jean noticed Navarro, a man who was not likely to grow old in any case.

Twenty times in the morning, and as many in the afternoon, Darboise had to face the brutal transition between the two temperatures. Towards the middle of the day he was seized with light shivering. Véchaud, meeting him, noticed how bad he looked, and strongly urged him to ask to be relieved.

Foolishly Jean persisted, in the fear of having to deal with Dubus. In the evening, the ther-

mometer that Andrée insisted on indicated high fever. She was uneasy, and passed the night in putting poultices on him. She was well versed in such matters, having nursed him through that winter at Cavalaire—nursed him too well, perhaps, for the Army had taken him again when he was better.

“Ah, you won’t go to work tomorrow!”

“That depends!”

In the morning the thermometer recorded 37 exactly—a severe but ordinary cold, and nothing alarming. But he preferred to get up and go to inspection rather than bother the major.

Corentin tapped him and sounded him, and was forced to admit that there was something: “Tincture of iodine and hot drinks; two days’ exemption from duty.”

During the forty-eight hours which he spent at the Rue Jules Ferry, Jean let himself be coddled at leisure. Remembering the doctor’s advice of last autumn, Andrée worried him to have his temperature taken every six hours.

Was it due to the condition of influenza? Two days running, the instrument rose to 38. “It’s too high, too high!” she said in alarm; “I wonder if you’re often like that!”

She made him put his boots on and took him to the chemist hard by, where he was weighed—over four pounds lost since he came to Dunkerque. They returned in anxiety; it was a menace. Nothing was impossible. He always remembered

his father, whom the insidious disease laid low in several months as he neared his fortieth year. And he remembered how his mother right up to the poor woman's death-bed, besought her Jean always to be watchful in the matter. Certainly he was leading a terrible life. The climate was severe and the food indifferent, and after that last attack——

"It's an awful nuisance," he sighed.

"Be quiet, you big donkey! Perhaps it's the best thing that could happen to you."

"What?"

Andrée shook him. Come now! If he became really ill, they would send him away from the zone of war or they would invalid¹ him out of the service. One of the two!

"Well, invalid! That's what you are! You've only got to speak, and show yourself."

He was doubtful. She argued with him. Let any doctor only verify the symptoms, this losing weight, to begin with. Seriously, too, she spoke of the night-time sweating, that she had noticed in him lately, though only slight as yet. She did so well that in a few hours her suggestions began to take effect. Let them turn to account the good luck that presented itself! It was possible! It was necessary!

The prospect was intoxicating; to fly in her dear company from that sullen northern land where the

¹ This is suspension rather than discharge, and carries reduced pay with it.—Tr.

sun never shone brightly and the sea was never blue! Invalided? Perhaps he would get it! He would be liberated from bondage, and would again be able to stand erect, to live, and to dream, far from the barbarians. When he had been invalided before, was he any more menaced than now? But he must be artful and make the best of his "case." There need be no compunction; his futile arm bore him striking witness that he had done his bit. Already he breathed the sweetness of liberty regained. They would finish their summer at Sceaux, watching Momo's capers—he was beginning to talk; or what about hunting up a cheap seaside place down in far-off Brittany? Like some wretch lost within the dark labyrinth of a mine, who glimpses the daylight at the end of a last gallery, his heart beat wildly.

CHAPTER III

BITTERNESS AND HATRED

So Jean went again to inspection, conscious of the big part he was playing.

That morning, Corentin did not seem to be ill disposed. He exempted Jean right away for three more days. When his comrades had filed out, Darboise presented himself again.

"What do you want?"

Skilfully and clearly he detailed to the surgeon the signs which were troubling him. The major did not snub him: "When I examined you the other day, I saw quite clearly that you're not sound." He added: "This climate isn't good for you, assuredly!"

Jean was thrilled—then, then? Would he nominate him——?

After a moment of silence, Corentin, suddenly nervous, said: "Oh, my position here, how vexing it is! I would rather go back to the front lines than do the job I'm doing here!"

Jean looked at him in surprise, and the little major, as if in spite of himself, opened his heart and made confession. Ah, he was between the

devil and the deep sea! Certainly, *he* was ready enough to pronounce them *all* ill, all "to be used carefully," these cripples and cachectics, the regular subscribers at "inspection," as well as those who put themselves on the sick list in weariness when they saw no sign of the return of their day off after two or even three weeks. Three-quarters of them ought to be sent home—there was nothing to be got out of them! On the other hand, if he was allowed to stay in St. Pol, and found it convenient to stay there, with his little lady friend, well, that was a good deal, was it not?—thanks to the captain and the lieutenant, and indeed all the staff, who had declared him indispensable and had procured him his stripe! (A report had been going about of insufficient medical enrolment, and that there was a "little list.")

"Well then, put yourself in my place! Papa Meunier makes it a point of honour not to let a single one of his men in the Depot go back. To invalid any of them is to give him a personal affront! And Fauvel! You know that we lunch together. He makes a face as long as *that* when I've 'passed sick' too many of the poor lads!"

Jean listened, and forced himself diplomatically into an appearance of appreciation. He still hoped, for the other had not said "No!" And indeed Corentin ended by saying: "Listen; I can't take the responsibility on myself. But there's one of your companions, an animal called Morel, who has just asked, against my advice, for

a re-examination. *He'll* get some salt on his tail! But any way I can put you down at the same time that I do him."

Jean could only jump at the offer, and Andrée approved of his doing so.

The next day, Sergeant Bousquet led the two of them to the Clearing Hospital. Jean had to wait for his companion, who hobbled. He was well known to him, old Papa Morel; he had always had the job of cleaner at the quarters ever since his arrival.

"What have you been doing to the major?" Jean asked him.

"Ah, that damned re-examination! I ought to have known it would turn out so; I ought never to have asked for it!"

He had undergone operation for a double rupture, of which one was serious, and already he wore numerous bandages. So fright had seized him the other day, when he discovered two new swellings. "Well, that makes four; that's all," said the major, superbly cool, as he dismissed him. He, the most concerned, did not think he had acted so wrongly in asking for another examination, so as to be satisfied about his condition. But Corentin would not admit it, and on the card shown to him, he had scribbled with surly pen: "This man was employed as caretaker at quarters. His request for re-examination does not appear justified to me."

"With *that* note, I can see him in a tight corner!"

the "chief" had murmured as he handed it to Bousquet. And Morel, gentle and fearful, shivered with apprehension all along the road as he prepared his arguments.

Darboise, thanks to the faculty for detachment which was useful to him in even the most serious situations, and almost in spite of himself, interested himself in his neighbour's "case." With a sort of cynical delight, he was expecting to see a masterpiece of iniquity perpetrated.

When the big major called the name "Morel," his tone was already one of concentrated anger.

The unfortunate man rose from his seat and went forward, frozen with fear.

"Will you hurry up—damnation!"

With bent back, stiff legs, and his stomach twitching, Morel hastened forward.

"What is it? What's the matter with you?"

The major had seized him by the arm. As the poor wretch was fumbling in his pockets, the other shouted: "Are you going to answer?"

Jean had come nearer, to follow the details of the scene that was so cruelly instructive for him!

He saw Morel unfasten his braces with his benumbed and trembling fingers, and let his trousers down. And he was seized with compassion before the nakedness of that semi-old man. Morel was forty-seven years; his legs were bowed and thin. Awkward and stumbling, he climbed on to the table and lay flat, with his shirt turned back. Over the scarred old belly, where one of

the new lumps was already big as one's fist, the big major bent his sallow and brutal face. His fingers groped and rubbed, wringing feeble moans from the victim.

"Hum! Nothing much!" he said, his glance consulting his two colleagues, surgeons of subaltern grade who acquiesced in advance.

"Your business?" he asked.

"Wall-paper dealer," said Morel.

"Dress yourself," said the major, with lordly contempt.

And taking the ticket in his hand, he wrote out this perfidious verdict: "Cannot do hard work. Can continue his employment at quarters."

Darboise's turn. To him were spared at least the rudeness of address, for they had guessed him to be a young man of the middle class who might number an M. P. among his friends. But still the arrogant, foolish face of the chief surgeon was visibly shut already to the slightest feeling of benevolence. He tapped the subject's back, then his shoulder-blades and clavicles. He made him count—"Thirty, thirty-one——"

"A little difficulty in respiration; nothing more." He turned to his two-striped colleague, who smiled, and by way of pleasing, said: "Who of us has not?"

"Four-stripes" scratched "To be used carefully" on the note and returned it to the sergeant.

"Is that all, major?" said Darboise.

"That's all. Come, trot! Break off!"

Jean went back, and found Andrée waiting anxiously. And it was then only that he felt the severity of the blow, after the great hope that had sustained him for two days.

Despondency followed which he could not surmount, either that day or the following ones. And Andrée herself overcome, failed this time to comfort him. There was no more hope before them, now that the apparently final rupture with Chinard brought to an end the overtures which might have recalled Jean to Paris. For him, then, it was to be St. Pol, the Textile, the Bakery, without remission, till the end of the war, that end which now appeared, after the thrill of hope at the beginning of July, to be once more indefinitely distant.

With what hatred for the state of things and for his lot did Jean feel himself overwhelmed! A fatal era, when humanity was degraded under a rule of iron! In furious tirades or ferocious sallies, he breathed forth his bitterness and made up the balance-sheet of what the war had been worth to him:

Item, two wounds of which the second left him maimed for life, partly deprived of the use of a limb, he who was once so proud of his nimbleness, of his physical amplitude. Item, this lung weakness, which he would drag with him all through life, which had prepared the way for the disease that would perhaps put him to sleep underground in a few years or perhaps months. Item, their

little capital seriously curtailed, on which they had thought they could depend, while waiting for success, to escape from employment of merely pecuniary interest; their capital now rapidly sinking towards zero. Item, his career shackled and retarded. Spoiled, under that rod of iron and amidst the stupefying effects of severe manual labour, those most fruitful years of youth when the mind should be growing wider and richer. Lost, his taste for the things of the spirit; fading, his confidence in his own ability. Those hands of his bruised and hardened and full of callosities, those hands always greasy and dirty, would they ever again be worthy to hold and direct the graver? And last of all, he perceived confusedly a loss still less replaceable—his freshness of mind, his optimism, an injury which was drawing out of his life so much significance and savour.

He, the enthusiast of but yesterday, believing in the beauty of things and the goodness of beings—what leaven of bitterness and hatred had fermented in his heart! He envied the child he had been, even while pitying him. He paid homage to his wife who, more mature and more far-sighted than himself, had always insisted on the universal harshness of the human animal, its inborn coldness, its instinct for oppression. He had now at a bound surpassed her in his ferocious judgments. It had needed the war to stir up the evil deeps in which his soul, like so many others, now felt itself submerged.

Jean even took affright; and truly, if one scanned with clairvoyant eye all his environment was there reason for aught but scorn and disgust in either the play or the actors? Since he came to Dunkerque, had he met a single one of those good, honest, intelligent people who make one love his species? Not one, among either his chiefs or his companions. Cowardly and evil natures, people of no conscience; not one friend. Cazenave? But had not the Bordelais quietly dropped him since he had lost his prestige? Monade? Would he ever have taken his part against the lieutenant? Oh, that gang of narrow-minded, jealous, egotistical people! That clown of a captain and that sneaking lieutenant!—the little vain and cowardly major, the unprincipled surgeons at the Clearing Hospital, supercilious and brutal! Yet these were of his race and nation. Frenchmen all! He repeated the word aloud. France, the sacred land of fraternity and light—to what was she fallen!

He clasped his wife in his arms. Seized with remorse, he had despairingly entreated her to stay yet a few days, at least until the imminent commencement of the night shift.

His days of "exemption from duty" were drawing to a close. On the last evening, haunted by memories and evil premonitions, he worked himself up to a high pitch of excitement, and overflowed in childish vagaries. It was all humbug about the "motherland" and "his country!" Anything at

all to escape from that gaol! Did they refuse to pronounce him ill? Very well, what about finding a way to become seriously so? It would not be difficult in his enfeebled condition. He would only have to forego nourishment, to exhaust himself with fatigue, to expose himself to heat and cold! And then—the thrice-happy suspension! From that idea his imagination spurred him towards bolder remedies, more dangerous, more absurd. He would claim his leave—his turn would come in a month—for the Eastern Pyrenees, and there chance the lot! Try—to cross the frontier; his wife could join him in Spain and bring the little one, and they would go to South America, where a youthful, rich, and art-loving people thrives in sunshine.

Andrée felt the futility of the schemes so recklessly budding in the poor agitated brain. She cuddled against her husband, and lulled him with loving words; talked to him of their Momo, whose prowess and progress were religiously related for them in grandma's daily letter. It broke her heart that she would soon be leaving him, her Jean, in that collapsed condition—her handsome Jean, whose proud and confident smile had once so often comforted *her* in her fits of pessimism. And yet—it flattered her, it stirred her innermost fibres, that it was to her alone that he clung with heartbroken fervour in the depths of his distress.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLIGHT OF ANDRÉE

IN his rank in the mournful troop, Darboise was returning through the dunes, after another bad day.

It was the "fodder fatigue" that day. Five or six of them, all more or less crippled, had protested first thing in the morning that they were not fit to shoulder from the crane to the haystacks the bales that weighed nearly two hundred pounds; so a little company of grouzers had formed several days since and had pleasantly christened themselves the Go-easy Brigade. Darboise was the only middle-class man of the party, which included Thuillier, Gautier Charles the zinc-worker, and Decante, the sight of whom was a set-off against that of Liébal. These gentlemen prided themselves on passing the time in gossip, on working with their heads only. They were the pet aversion of the non-coms., who nevertheless tacitly avoided anything that might provoke a row. Sergeant Gandolphe was the only one of them whom the group looked upon favourably. He often intervened in favour of the "cripples!" That morning again he had confronted Dubus

and succeeded in getting them withdrawn from the team of carriers and put on to chopping up the piled hay.

The Go-easy Brigade lazed till lunch-time. Gandolphe, detained two hundred yards away, could only once pass their way: "I say," he protested, uneasily, "that's not gone far, boys!" (There was three hours' work in it.)

"Don't worry, sergeant. It'll be finished this evening, easily!"

He had not returned. And, anyway, it would not rain tonight, so the job was in no hurry! The afternoon began in the same idleness.

Jean had begun to look through a number of the *Quotidien*. Monday? Why, that was the day for Chinard's drawing! Yes, it was spreading itself over the front page, a drawing which showed a couple of soft-jobbers sipping a liqueur, with the title, "Think of the Future!" and this legend following: "What shall you do to get out of it, when the next war comes?—I? I shall assassinate Jaurès!"

The drawing seemed weak and conventional to Jean. He was bent on seeking its faults when a voice behind him made him start:

"Hey, now! There's a good-for-nothing!"

It was Dubus, pipe in mouth, and his mastiff at his heels, as always, nose to ground.

Jean glanced at his companions. Warned in time, each had grabbed the corner of a tarpaulin and busied himself. He alone, "pinched!"

"Why, I know him," the adjutant went on. "Always the same men! Hey, sergeant!" He turned towards Gandolphe, who ran up, scenting a storm.

"The name of this man?"

"Darboise," said the sergeant, without hesitation—for which Jean felt spiteful.

"Good, good."

Dubus had produced his greasy note-book. "This time he will understand the reason for his punishment. As for you, Gandolphe, I shall mention you as responsible. I've had enough of it!"

Dubus went away again, furious. In a few days Jean might expect to hear——

Would they believe him? What irritated him most was the severe reprimand which Gandolphe gave him in the presence of his comrades.

Arrived at quarters, Jean was astonished to see a note written on the duty-list: "Joseph Morel, eight days' imprisonment, by order of Captain Meunier, commanding the detachment. Reason: Having insisted on a re-examination in which he was not found unfit."

Jean forgot his own troubles. He could not help saying aloud: "It's disgraceful, that. I was there, and saw what happened."

Decante read the notice, and said, jeeringly: "With a 'reason' like that one, he'll not stop at a fortnight!"

"And the best of it is," added Clément, "that

Corentin has recommended him for a fighting unit, in revenge!"

New arrivals were hurrying up. The incident did not count for much among the poor devils who were used to all sorts of injustice. They jostled each other to see the list, which was pinned up in a corner, of the men appointed for the night-shift at the "bakery" on Saturday, five days hence. Jean had seen his name and so he withdrew from the scrimmage. Saturday? Would he not be in prison? And that was the date, so often postponed, of Andrée's departure. Bah! Setting off with long strides for the lodging in the Rue Jules Ferry, he encouraged himself to cultivate a primitive attitude of mind, and to make the best of such happiness as might come along. The hopeful vision of the four rapturous nights still to pass in *her* dear presence softened the pressure of foreboding evil which weighed upon his spirits.

He looked for her through the window. No, not this time! He went into the passage and pushed the door open. Their room was empty. He went on into the other one; still no one—to his surprise.

"Madame Mafranc!" he called.

There was no answer. The idea came to him that perhaps Andrée was hiding, for mischief. Only last week she had played the roguish trick on him. Weary and troubled as he was, he made no attempt to conceal himself. Conscientiously he looked behind the bed and the curtains. Stealth-

ily he went and half opened the cellar door, and cried, "Cuckoo!"

But there was no Andrée lurking in that dark recess. Wandering through the silent house, he met only the little deaf mute who, with her little hand in her mouth, watched him with her big dreamy eyes.

Enough of trifling. He stopped in the middle of the room and cried: "Come, dear! I've done enough walking! That's sufficient!"

He waited a few seconds, then sat down and took a newspaper. Hardly had he cast his eyes over it when he thought he heard a scratching sound. Ah, the big cupboard—he had not looked there! It was a good place. Evidently she was there. What a dear baby to amuse herself like that!

He got up, crossed the room on tiptoe, and opened the cupboard quickly. His first astonishment was that no one was there; and the second stabbing surprise, that it was empty—empty! How distinctly he remembered what it had looked like that very morning, with Andrée's cloak and her three light blouses hanging above her leather handbag.

He reached the wardrobe. That also was almost entirely emptied! There were only his own linen and his soldier's traps, which filled the top shelf. An atrocious pang shot through his heart.

The landlady was coming in. He went into the yard: "Madame Mafranc!"

She clasped her hands: "Ah, what a business this is, M'sieur Darboise!"

"What business? Where is Madame?"

"She told me to tell you, like that, that she was going away——"

"Going away?"

He looked at her steadily; then fearing both to understand and to be understood, he went whistling back to his room. His ears were buzzing and his legs trembling. Dully he wondered: "Has it come, has it come—the disaster of my life?" He was afraid to look in the face the spectre that rose before him—the dreadful uncertainty already certain.

He called Madame Mafranc back: "You don't know if—if, by chance, Madame had received a telegram?"

"That I couldn't say, m'sieur."

"Well then——" he feigned impatience to conceal his anguish: "What time did she go? Come now, what's happened?"

He had to tear the words out of her.

"It was—perhaps two o'clock, about—yes—my man had just gone back—when Madame asked for me, and she'd packed up, and was just putting her hat on. I asked her: 'Has something turned up, madame?' And she replied: 'I must go,' like that; and then she said: 'If by chance those ladies call again who came the other day, you will tell them that—I've gone to Malo.'"

Jean pretended to be satisfied with the queer

narrative. But that call on the d'Estignards—a clue! He put his cap on again and went out.

Disburdened of his fatigue, he ran and jumped on to a running tram at the corner of the street.

The d'Estignards were at dinner when he went into the room without waiting to be announced. Sylvaine, stricken with fear at the sight of the consternation in his face, stood up: "Another telegram? The little one?"

Jean stood transfixed with surprise for a few seconds; then, regaining control, he lied. Andrée had only left word that she was catching a train.

Madame d'Estignard affirmed: "Through getting a telegram?"

"Yes—the little one—in danger!" he said.

"We advised her rather to wait till tomorrow. She would have caught a better train, one that would have landed her in Paris almost as quickly. But she wouldn't listen to us."

Monsieur d'Estignard nodded his head: "As soon as she asked me——"

"For the permit—did you——?"

"Yes, I had the luck to get it, after steering her all over the town, and then I took her to the station just now."

Sylvaine had already beckoned for a place to be prepared for Jean, but he escaped, rather nervously, objecting that he had no right to come and was risking punishment. And if he had known that he would find out so little——

“What did you think, then, that we should tell you?” the young girl asked ingenuously.

He blushed. The strangeness of his overtures appeared to him. More briefly than was proper he sputtered some excuses, shook their hands, and took his leave.

He returned on foot, and all the way along the road chaotic reflections rolled through his mind. In spite of appearances, he was haunted by a suspicion. That tale of a telegram—suppose it was not a tale, after all? The postman might have brought it without the landlady’s seeing it—a telegram from Madame Sartiagues—a relapse, indeed—and even serious! Strongly Jean wished, even while reproaching himself for the ferocious desire, that it might be that—rather—rather than the other thing, good God!

He went in, and immediately Madame Mafranc appeared to ask him if, for his dinner,—

“No thanks; I don’t want dinner—not hungry!”

He began savagely to prowl about the two rooms. What should he do? Sometimes he stopped and put his hands to his head. What? What? He would have sworn that Germaine—that the Trousseliers were somehow mixed up in it, and he was on the point of going to see them. But there were not sufficient data, all the same. He recalled the landlady and asked her point-blank if she had not seen—one of the two women in the neighbourhood.

When he found her uneasy and hesitating, he

assumed the rôle of examining magistrate. Little by little, still in faltering fragments and with nerve-racking repetitions, she corrected her story. Madame had first gone out after lunch, as though she were going into the country to read, but she had come back in two minutes, trembling all over. She said she had met—who, then?—the old Trousselier woman, with Mademoiselle Vandembücke; and they were whispering in such a way as she went by, and had stared at her so, that she couldn't stand it, and went up to them to see what they wanted.

"They got blabbing to her, it seems—they're foul-mouthed, those women! A real row! It's over that that Madame came back and shut herself up."

"At that moment, had she decided yet to go away?"

"Oh, certainly not! That was a little later."

"When was it?"

"I was just hanging my washing up in the yard when I heard some one moving in the passage. I went to see—Mademoiselle Vandembücke! 'What do you want?' She went and pushed a piece of paper, as one might say, under Madame's door, and then made herself scarce without giving me any answer."

"And then?"

"It was twenty minutes afterwards that I saw Madame again, like that, with her hat on."

Having dismissed the landlady, Jean still tried

to delude himself. At least he had no final proof. That "piece of paper"—no doubt it was some letter in which the vixens must have scribbled their accusation. And the style it would be in! Could Andrée be satisfied with that?

Night was falling. Darboise closed his shutters and lit his lamp. During the half-hour that followed, what upset him still more was to hear, behind the partition alongside, the observations of Mafranc, who had come in drunk, and whom his wife had made the mistake of telling at once about their beautiful lodger's leaving. The drunkard was surprised at first, then angry: "Without saying good-bye to us, then! Does she take us for dogs?"

He sent for some wine, and becoming rapidly heated, he threatened to go and tell Monsieur Darboise some truths about himself; so that his wife, going round by the passage, came to warn Jean: "He's beastly drunk again! M'sieur had better perhaps bolt his door."

Jean took her advice. Thus confined, a fearful lucidity returned to him. It was impossible that the fugitive had not left a word in writing. Lamp in hand, he began to search through the two rooms. On the mantelpiece or toilet-stand? No. One by one he moved the papers that littered the table. Had she refused him even a few lines of explanation?

Nothing, nothing. And then, as he went near the bed again, at the end of theorising, something

caught his eye—some whitish fragments which hardly showed against the white pillow. Some of these he seized eagerly and placed them on the table under the circle of the lampshade—and instantly, he could doubt no longer.

There, torn to pieces in a paroxysm of rage, was the sheet on which, a month before, he had drawn the portrait of Germaine—and added his dedication! Remembering his own unwillingness to sign it, and her insistence, a violent feeling of spite sprang up in him against his former mistress. He did not go so far as to think that she had herself given up that portrait. But he could so easily link again the chain of events: the old lady, aware of the intrigue and waiting for the proof she wanted, ready to steal it perhaps, and one fine day putting her hand right on it; and the other woman, the horrible Vandembücke, admitted to the secret; and the mean revenge prepared.

So it was all up! Andrée had fled and was lost, perhaps, for ever! In terror Jean thought of her quick, decisive temper—on that point alone was she inexorable. A creature of impulses, and he adored her for it. How many times had she warned him—"Darling, if you were not true to me, you would never see me again in your life."

And that menace had come to pass! Would she go further? He remembered how quickly her expression became tragic when she touched on that subject. She would speak openly of killing herself, and him, and her rival. Even the

most sensible and tolerant of women, when one makes an attempt upon her end in life—! And then he saw her again, clasping him in half-hysteric fervour, and giving him to understand that he was that glorious lover's chief reason for existing. What resolve did that desperate flight in the evening conceal?

If the discovery had been made in the early days of their marriage, ah, certainly, he would have had to fear the irreparable act, that they would be bringing her back to him any minute, crushed under the wheels of some train. Today, the circumstances were different. He glowed with the warmth of certainty that she still breathed. And for Andrée, in spite of all, *he* was no longer the only one. There was their little child at Sceaux! The ingenious pretence under which she had concealed her reason for going betrayed the firm foundation which still held her fast to the world.

She was living, and would live, for the chubby little thing whom love had created in her. And Jean, who had not yet felt the sacred thrill towards the wailing being that only made a future appeal to him, Jean whose paternal instinct arose in him, for the first time perhaps, hailed with ardent affection the cradled child down yonder, the child whose feeble life riveted the immortal links between its sundered parents.

CHAPTER V

A PERIOD OF WAITING

So Darboise mastered himself and refused to despair. He would summon his strength to write to Andrée at once.

At first he had to hunt for words. He had no desire to affect the astonishment of the man who cannot understand why,—that was a part unworthy of him. Deny everything? An obvious lie, which would not save him. Confess everything? Why should they both die of shame, he and she alike? So he embarked only on indefinite references. He appeared to admit his errors; and belaboured himself with *mea culpa*; and he did not shut out the alleviating supposition of a—a flirtation which was devoid of significance. That dedication was only a bit of cheeky sentiment. (Ah, if there had been nothing more!)

Suddenly he tired of that style. His pen began to fly. Ceasing to excuse and defend himself, he felt naturally and sensibly that the eternal way to disarm one who loves you is to excite pity for your state.

He pictured the gulf of despondency towards

which he had secretly tended for several weeks. Andrée alone had held him back from the brink. And now today, in what a still more hideous abyss he was on the point of sinking! Would she not have pity on him, blessed pity! He grew excited, and the letter became a long cry of sorrow and pain. Arrangement disappeared from it. Recent happenings he blended with the flow of his sincere emotion. What rose to the surface and established itself as the subject of these boiling pages, was the assertion of his love, for which he devised new words and symbols. He revived again those hours of intimacy in which they had so lately renewed their strength. Had they not then enjoyed all there was in life—the only real happiness? Appealing boldly to her body and her soul, he preached the duty of pleasure—it would be a crime to refuse *him*! He went on to warn Andrée against her inflexible nature. If *she* was infallible, let her make allowances for human weakness! One should not break with everything, nor with anything, for the sake of an error that had no morrow!

In another chapter he contrived to talk to her about their little one. He used simple and caressing terms that he imagined would set her sobbing. With affecting seriousness he spoke of their duty towards the little innocent. Further on—for all sorts of arguments seemed good to him—he even dared to allude to the resolve he should make in case of a rupture between them. (In those words

he was less sincere, for as he thought that the sweetness of so much love must surely revive again, life appeared once more to be worth living.) He gave up the idea of perusing again all the litany that had gushed from his imperilled soul. As dawn came, and he enclosed the sheets with weary eyes, he imagined that he had mitigated his mistake, had averted the punishment that threatened.

A period of waiting began. Wednesday and Thursday went by. With such delays in the mail deliveries, he could not expect an answer in less than four days.

Darboise had held out hopes to himself, it is true, that she would have written to him herself when she reached Paris. At the two daily deliveries he plagued the big baggage-master, who refused him with a laugh: "Nothing! Keep your hair on!"

After the second evening he had a sudden anxiety. His letter was addressed to Sceaux and possibly Andrée and the child had returned to the Rue de Vaugirard, and that a careless postman had done the rest. Jean decided to send a wire, announcing the letter sent, but it annoyed him that the telegram would have to be handed in by the Mafrancs.

The man had received extra pay and was not sober all the week-end. The woman, abashed and unnerved, whom her husband cursed for hours together, evinced foolish solicitude for her lodger by asking him every hour for news of his "lady." She took the telegram away to be endorsed by the

chief of police,¹ with some wagging of her head for which Darboise could have struck her.

Employed all day at the Textile, he appreciated, no doubt for the first time, the blessing of that physical weariness which diverts the mind from its worries. Without affectation he broke with the Go-easy Brigade, nor was his departure regarded complacently by the rest of the band.

"He's deserting us," cried Liébal; "he'll not get off that way!"

It was known all through the Textile that he had got into another scrape with Dubus, at the "fodder fatigue"; that was the reason, no doubt, why he was clearing out. So he got rather a cool welcome from the corporals:

"I warn you," Valentin said to him, "as soon as you start shirking, I shall report you."

They misread his motives. A paltry reason for anxiety, that report, compared with his others!

He spent himself recklessly during those days, and sought fatigue. He exceeded his strength, he had no appetite, his back seemed broken, his face was drawn. He was kept going by a confused ambition to fall ill—so ill that it would touch her heart.

And then on the third evening—it was raining,—when he regained his empty room, lo, he felt a still graver anxiety! Had the ordeal lasted a century? The vanity of all he had written to her—and he had known it! The one thing

¹ Apparently a war-time precaution.—TR.

necessary was to see Andrée again, to bring her again within the magnetism of his gaze and his petition. But where and how? There were four weeks yet to his regular leave. Should he go and find the lieutenant, and get the leave advanced on some pretence? No—in view of those reports! Yet Jean knew that if one could show a telegram announcing some serious domestic event, “four days” were usually obtained without too much difficulty.

Whom could he get to send him a kindly wire? In Paris, his comrades were becoming scarce. Darboise thought of Pravel, an obliging chap, exempted, and now a writer at the Ministry of the Interior. In a letter-card he besought Pravel to send him with all speed a telegram requiring his urgent presence.

Darboise had not seen Germaine again. Now that their carnal union was broken, the thought alone of the imprudence she had been guilty of—the woman one loves, one pardons!—had decided him to have done with her. It mattered nothing what she might suffer—the egotism of passion!

On Friday evening as he was getting ready to go to bed about nine o'clock, he heard a timid knocking on his shutter, and anxiety gripped him. If it was Germaine! He decided not to move, but stayed in his arm-chair, with sweat on his brow.

More knocking; then someone tried the outside door. It was bolted, and the visitor returned to the shutter.

Jean had resolved in no way to betray his presence, hoping they would be quickly discouraged. But perhaps they had been on the watch for him, and made sure that he was there. It went on; every three seconds the same timid tap was repeated—exasperating at length, intolerable at last.

After five minutes, perhaps, he got up quickly, went to the window, opened it, and lifted the shutter-hasp.

It was indeed Germaine, that outline smothered in a dark shawl. The big black-ringed eyes that spoke of deep distress but slightly affected him.

"What do you want?" he said sharply.

"I want—I want to speak to you."

"There's no need!"

"I know—I've found out, today—it was the old woman—she's sto—stolen my——"

Poor Germaine was stammering. Really, she must have erred in stupid negligence, but he only felt his resentment flare up again. With a brutality which surprised himself, he cried: "It's your fault—all that has happened—everything! I hate you! Get out of here!"

"Jean! Jean!"

He tried to close the shutter again, but she seized it.

"Jean!—I beg your pardon—listen, let me come in——"

He knew what she would do;—throw herself upon him, disarm him, take him captive again,

perhaps. The duplicity of women! His blood boiled. Feverishly he pulled the shutter inwards—"Ah!" she groaned.

Her fingers were caught between the wood and the stone edge. With his own, his masculine, rage-contracted hands, he detached, one by one, each of those miserable fingers. The hand disappeared in the dark. Then he pulled the shutter violently in, and fastened it.

And at that moment the generosity which was the foundation of his nature emerged from under the flood of anger, as a rock arises from the sweeping tide-race. "What a brute I've been!" In a flash, the position appeared to him in another light. Piteous Germaine! How light her faults were by the side of his own! Hastily, with a pang of fraternal compassion, he went into the corridor and then into the street.

The pavement was deserted. He was stupefied. She must have fled madly, by a cross-street. He walked a little farther and drank in the night air. He looked up at the stars that the poets have sung—and from the confusion of his soul a cry of anguish escaped: "My God, if there is a God, why does so much evil fall on us?"

CHAPTER VI

A PACKET FROM PARIS

THE next was a day of "rest," but of rest cut short; for that very evening at six o'clock, the night shift was beginning.

When he woke up, Darboise thought he had a chance to escape it. By that time Pravel would have received his letter, and the day would not go by without a telegram of liberation. Provided he had obtained his leave, he would be able to catch the 10.27 train.

Mother Mafranc had just finished swilling the passage and had gone into the street to scrub in the front of the gate, when the sound of an altercation reached Jean, and a chill ran through him as he thought he recognised a voice:

"We'll see whether he cares or not," it cried, "if I make a complaint!"

Mother Trousselier! What was to be done? He must go out, and the landlady made way for him to show himself.

He hoped to silence her by the sternness of his glance, but the old woman, with arms akimbo, took a step towards him:

"Leading the mother of a family astray! It's disgraceful, I say!" she cried, in a voice to rouse the neighbourhood; "and my son in the trenches!"

Women appeared, attracted by the noise.

"She's just tried to suffocate herself," yelled the shrew; "yes, and her babies. If I hadn't smelt the gas——"

She raised her fist towards Darboise: "All on account of that mucky-face there!"

As he shrugged his shoulders and made as if he would go in, she shouted louder still: "If the police do their duty——!"

He went in, trying to make his retreat look as little as possible like flight. Germaine's frightful attempt! It was the natural sequel, alas, to his savagery of the night before. At least it had not succeeded. But—his thoughts and his conscience turned like a trapped beast—it was possible that this new scandal might be fatally spread abroad! A complaint to the Detachment—and if the telegram did not come within 'an hour—! For, once in prison, it was all up with his hopes!

Outside, the enraged harangue of the old woman continued. The gossips of the street were round her and the murmur of a crowd could be heard. They were hostile to the stranger, on the whole. Yet Jean, who was watching the pantomime behind the curtain, thought he detected another current of feeling. The girls and young women seemed to be captivated by an occurrence in which death had

very nearly been mingled with love. They, who knew Darboise and whose looks were fixed on his windows, were disposed to be indulgent towards such a nice-looking fellow. He made out several remarks:

“I say, he didn’t take her by force!”

And the voice of the butcher’s wife also arose: “What a tale—that he was going with her! Why, he had his wife with him!”

“And she’s not the only one!” retorted another. In the laughter that followed he detected bantering complicity!

Mother Trousselier was losing ground, and her last shot was fatal to her: “The sod!” she screamed; “why I might have been suffocated with them!”

Wild laughter sounded. The shrew cursed her audience, and low jests showered on her. “Old lunatic!” they called her. Snarling she turned on her heels: “Let him hide himself—I’ll play hell with him, with a vengeance!”

Darboise remained in a state of nervous bewilderment. As he was getting ready to go to quarters for breakfast, Cazenave jumped from his bicycle at the gate: “A telegram for you, old chap!”

Pretending surprise, Jean opened the envelope: “Anything new yonder?” he asked, fearing that the Trousselier scene might already have had consequences.

“Nothing whatever.”

He glanced at the writing. "Bad news?" Cazenave asked.

"No, no." He read it again to himself: "Too risky in my position letter follows sorry compliments—Pravel."

Jean gave a short laugh: "Another of them!" Then, as Cazenave was looking at him: "No great importance! But—laughable!"

The other got on his bicycle again, and Jean went out behind him. He was possessed by an immense ironical contempt for others and for himself. Was he not incorrigible, to be still contriving? How French it was, that fear of being held accountable! That egotistical selfishness, how human it was!

At quarters, another shock. For that morning of rest, Fauvel had thought fit to order a rifle inspection. Darboise's rifle was found pitted with rust, and the lieutenant required that the weapon should be shown to him again at two o'clock.

It was as good as anything else! As soon as lunch was over, Darboise bent over the ungrateful task, taking to pieces, cleaning, and oiling. Yet he hardly satisfied Fauvel, who quite failed to unbend when he "passed" his second inspection. In the blankness of his brain, Jean clung to one hope; if Andrée had answered him her letter would arrive that evening!

The anxiety of the Trousselier incident was coursing through his mind. He expected every

minute to be ordered to the Bureau. When about half-past three, he saw a gendarme crossing the threshold of the school, he felt that—But it was not so; the man came out again, his errand having concerned only some changed addresses.

Sergeant Gandolphe was going through the mess-rooms. He had been marked to take charge of the fatigue in the night turn. He was examining his list again and again, uneasy about the unfit cases and the "unavailables," and anxious to have his hundred and ten men ready, not one more or less, to present to Adjutant Morinet at six o'clock.

Looking at Jean, he said: "Hey, Darboise, you've got a funny look."

"I'm going on all right, don't worry."

"I require you," said the sergeant, "to carry a waistcoat or some warm undergarment in your pouch. One feels the cold at three in the morning."

"I know."

Thuillier and Clément came up.

"Yes, he's right there!"

Thuillier, in a chaffing tone, added some words of explanation: "Because—and this is the best of it, listen; the beauty of the 'bakery' by night—now that they only do four batches, the thickest of the job finishes about half-past two in the morning. You can call it finishing if you like! Do you think they let you go? Cachin, the mongrel, asked for it—and he got it! You go away from the ovens all in a sweat and you've got to stay

there till six o'clock. You go to sleep in the corners, and there are hellish draughts. Is that fair to human beings, eh? In winter it's enough to kill you!"

.

The time for the muster was approaching. In his miserable overall, his bulging pouch on his shoulder, Jean was only on the lookout for the coming of the baggage-master. When big Fenouillet appeared: "Anything for me, sergeant?"

"Yes, and you've got to sign for it. Go up to the next floor."

Something registered! No doubt that was her precaution, so that her letter would not go astray!

But in the little office up there, when Hirschfeld handed him the receipt book, what uneasiness! A packet—and from Paris! He left the room, and Fenouillet handed him a tiny box.

Standing aside on the landing, Darboise gazed at it. He knew the writing—it was his mother-in-law's. Strange! Mistrust gripped his heart as he tore off the red seal and the string.

The box was stuffed with cotton-wool. He took one layer away, and another. A gold ring appeared. He took it out and weighed it in his hand a second, refusing to understand. He turned it over, seeking the microscopic lettering traced on its inner side. He read: "Jean-Andrée, June 23, 1913."

It was the covenant he had handed to her on the sacred day of their wedding.

Staggering down the stair, he was forced to lean on the rail. He jostled the "chief," and did not see him.

CHAPTER VII

AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK

THIS night work, which returned every three months for four weeks, was universally detested. The general unwillingness showed itself at the roll call, which was particularly toilsome; for along the length of the column, on the platforms of the Port, the gaps were repeated at every step.

Never yet had Darboise been assigned to the "bakery" properly so called, being entirely ignorant of the job.

The non-coms. presented themselves and each claimed for his "tent" his number of men, ten here, twelve or fourteen there. Jean found himself allotted to "tent" No. 7, situated near the middle of the hangar.

As soon as he got there, the sergeant pushed him towards a big man whose chest was bare to the waist—"See, there's your drudge, my friend!"

The other, scowling at the sight of Jean, said:

"Been one before, eh?"

"No."

"You look like it—another specimen!" said the big man, as he turned to one of his assistants,

a swarthy chap in overalls, who had a sneakish look and began to laugh: "Damn it! They do choose 'em for us, the blighters!"

Darboise made as if he was going to put his pouch down when the man pushed his arm: "Get a move on, by God, I say! You'll make us late!"

"What is there to do?"

"There's your tool!"

The big baker handed him a heavy cleaver, and Jean looked vaguely at its jagged edge.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Is it for chopping wood?"

"Into little bits, sonny!"

"Where's the wood?"

"Well, talk about a stick!" the big oven-tender cried.

Hatchet in hand, Darboise went out, and be-thought himself of the mad rush of his companions towards the southern exit of the Textile. Hastening his steps, but without running, he arrived a good last in the locality of the wood fatigue, and there he regretted his tardiness. For in the heaps to which a sentry was rudely directing everybody, the wily ones had already laid violent hands on the light and small wood. Only lusty logs were left, thankless stuff to cut.

"*You're* all right, old chap!" Thuillier cried to him as he cheerfully carried his load away on his shoulder: "*You're* going to get what for!"

"How do they make out that with a tool like

this—?" He was looking at the weapon's flattened and mangled edge.

"Damn—that's hard!" was the other's opinion, as he went off with dragging steps.

Jean tried to carry two logs away on his shoulder, but they slipped off. Unable to carry them as they were, he began trying to split them on the spot. But, as he had foreseen, his ailing arm failed him,—too weak to hold the log still. The blunted edge of the hatchet, too, bit badly, and hammered without dividing the close-set fibres of beech. Panting and exhausted at the end of a few minutes, he broke off and said aloud: "I can't do it, that's all!"

He sat down on the pile of wood. And suddenly losing interest in these slavish demands, it pleased him again to pick up the thread of his disconsolate meditation—"Andrée, Andrée!" He lived again through the oscillation of his hopes and fears of recent days. He had refused to believe that there could be a definite breaking off. But that return of the ring——

"I say! What game are you playing with us?"

A shadow arose—the "kneader," grumbling.

"I was waiting for you," said Jean coolly, "to tell you that—it's impossible."

"Impossible? What's impossible?"

"To do that job. I'm wounded."

The other shrugged his shoulders: "My lad, we know all about that sort of chatter! If they've

sent you to the fatigue, probably it's because you haven't been declared unfit."

"Excuse me. If I liked——"

"Don't move from here. I'm off to tell the corporal."

The man disappeared. Thuillier, who had returned to fetch the rest of his load, stopped in front of Darboise and heard the story. He rubbed his hands:

"You did right. They mustn't mess us about too much, these swine of sentries—a lot of chaps that have never been to the front!"

"Do you think," said Jean, whose blood was boiling, "they haven't been?"

"Certain sure! What a scandal it is! Strapping fellows not thirty years old, mind, and armed service, too!"

Darboise clenched his fists, and declared, "I'll risk it!"

As he went off, Thuillier said: "Mind, all the same! There are some dirty beasts among these corporals!"

"'Bakehouse corporal'? Is that a non-com.?"

"That depends. Some are real corporals."

"I didn't see any stripe on mine."

"You've got to pick and choose. Do as I do. I chop one half of their wood. Look, you've got the two assistant-bakers. We're there to give them a lift, no more and no less——"

As he disappeared Jean saw the "bakehouse corporal" and the kneader appearing round the

corner of a wood-pile. The big oven-feeder had put on a little jacket. Very red, and his eyes bulging, he addressed Darboise:

"What's the matter? You refuse to work, eh?"

"I don't refuse. I say that I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I had my elbow shot through, five months ago, at Douaumont."

"Take care, my lad. There are some worse off than you and it hasn't stopped them from buckling to!"

Darboise had noticed the double red stripe on the man's cap. A flash of prudence passed through him. Kneeling, he took the heavy cleaver in hand for another attempt, ungraciously, in truth, but the log would not be cut, and his crippled arm was an obvious acquittal.

At the end of half a minute, the corporal was satisfied. "You get into it, too, Marius!" he said to his companion.

The assistant smothered a grimace. Whistling he went off to find a hatchet in good trim. Returning, he began to split and shape with surprising dexterity, but not saying a word to Jean. The latter offered to help him. No, the other snubbed him tartly. But when the task was finished, he said spitefully: "You'll suffer for that, and quickly!"

The sun had just set. Jean's head was bent as he went along, heedless of the first twinkling of stars in the depth of the sky. The wind had fallen,

and the immense harbour and its resounding quays had become silent. The rows of cranes no longer flourished their fantastic antennæ, but looked in the twilight like fabled monsters lying in wait for their prey. All the western sky was steeped in a rosy glow, and against it the lighthouse stood out in sepulchral white. The big vessels along the quays were in repose, their curved flanks sinking into a tide of lemon yellow. Opposite the battleship *Freycinet VIII.*, the grey hulks of destroyers looked like huge turtles. Though vulgarised during the day by the uproar of humanity, the peace of evening lent to the spectacle a majestic serenity which Jean could not help enjoying, even under the circumstances.

At that hour, all of life there was seemed to have fled into the Textile. In the invading darkness, the entry to the hangar lost something of its heavy and commonplace design. Inside, the few lamps that had just been lit at the Office of Staff only revealed vague outlines, and could not drive away the shadow which gradually swallowed the gloomy heaps of sacks, submerged the summits of the iron pillars, and enlarged in mysterious beauty the no longer connected arches.

Jean had to make two trips. The first time he saw through the opening of the huge central way a span of still fiery sky. The second, there was only a narrow strip of color in a wide expanse of grey. The artist in him regretted the lost splendour. But, as he turned the other way, around him a

mighty humming was growing louder—the roar of the fires that were lighting, and under the “tents” he could hear the efforts of the toilers. Great beams of light flashed forth at intervals, half-veiled by columns of tawny smoke. For some minutes Jean stood, captivated by the panorama of the energy and achievement of today.

Then he shrugged his shoulders as he walked on again. It was only the crushing of human beings that was being accomplished in the grand pageant.

“Look out there, good Lord!” A black mass was moving on to him, the tail-end of a backing train whose engine was whistling hoarsely yonder. Jean had jumped aside. With a retrospective shiver he realized by that fact that he had no wish to die, and he gave thanks to the fate that still preserved in him a desire to get the upper hand again.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE "BAKERY"

"WE'RE damnably behind time!"

"Whose fault is it?" said Marius.

"That swine there!" declared the bakehouse corporal, pointing to Jean.

"All the same, I got him out of the mess!" the baker went on.

"I know. Without that, we should never have finished."

Jean had to go through his apprenticeship under the guidance of the second assistant, a little surly man, who was either wordless, which was most often, or who muttered unintelligible information between his teeth. This lowly task of the "drudge" was made up of a thousand well-timed movements to which he was quite unaccustomed and for which he had no compensating enthusiasm.

The ninety-six bread-tins had to be arranged and stacked in the order required by the oven-filler; then they must be befloured inside and dragged to the kneading-trough. The bakers were in a hurry that night—the kneading was rather superficial and the weighing rather hasty! Briskly the

tins were filled with lumps of dough and rounded with a few perfunctory thumb-dabs. Carrying them four or six at once in his arms, Darboise took them to the corporal, who, when the first were put down on the edge of his pit, slanged him, saying: "What do you want to be so long for, bringing them back?"

With his long-handled shovel the "filler" was busily putting the tins on their chosen spots in the hot oven; dexterous and swift, he stormed at the "drudge's" delays. Then it was Jean's job to carry away the fire-shovel—devilish heavy, and spitting fire. He wandered about some minutes looking for the cinder-pails. Clément, meeting him, told him where to look. Returning he was caught up again for not having brought back the "flag," as they called it—a wet cloth fastened to the end of a long handle. Then Marius fell foul of him—why didn't he go and fetch the trolley?

Baking-time brought respite to the fatigue-men. Darboise saw his companions at the other ovens "knock off." Weary, and regarding his task as finished for the moment, he went a few yards away and sat on one of the shafts of the trolley.

Immediately the corporal hailed him: "Hey, lad, can't stop there!"

"Do you want me?"

"Stay here, I tell you; that's enough."

The big man was obviously delighted at having humiliated him. A laugh split his heavy snout. Chattering with Marius he resumed his work.

Still standing, and his back nigh broken, Jean was forced to remain close by them. The accent of his two companions—of a meridian which was not his—scorched his ears. Bravely he tried to detach himself, and think. He tried to sum up the chances of happiness that he still retained, and found them, alas, very small! But recalling certain passages in his long letter that might have melted a hyena's heart, he pictured Andrée seized with sudden remorse,—writing, telegraphing—

His weariness betrayed itself. Enviously he looked at the tall bin hard by which would serve him at least to lean against. Again he made a movement that way. But the others were watching him. The corporal looked straight at him, and then turned to his assistant, and the two accomplices tittered.

Still restraining himself, Darboise decided to wait till Gandolphe passed and ask him to intervene with the sergeant of the "tent." He might at least be authorized to sit down, he who had just been ill, and as long as they had nothing for him to do!

But Gandolphe did not appear till nearly eleven o'clock. He was accompanied by Lesdrat, the "juice-man," who carried a bucket of steaming liquid. There was a general relaxing. When the drinking-cups were filled, the sergeant distributed slices of sausage. Hunches of bread came out of the pouches, and the "snack" lasted several minutes, the only real respite of the night.

The first baking was finishing. At Oven 2, to which Jean was assigned, they were late, and the dough, insufficiently kneaded, required longer baking. Bah! "Be damned to it!" said the oven-feeder. As long as they finished at the same time as the others, or even a bit sooner!

"Oh, I say!" laughed Marius at the look of the first loaf, withdrawn as a sample—burnt outside, underdone inside—"the poilus that swallow that——!"

"Don't worry," replied the big man, "they won't come back to bullyrag you!"

Provisions for the front!

The corporal turned to Darboise: "Bring the trolley up, you!" And as soon as Jean had carried the order out: "Stick there, and look out. We shall throw you the bullets, and you'll put them away as they come."

Without further explanation, the oven-feeder pulled a smoking loaf out on his shovel, and it was seized by his helper.

"Hep!" The latter, with a sharp movement, threw it at the "drudge."

"Ah!" It burned Jean's hands, fell, and rolled away.

"Be careful, clumsy devil!"

"It's hot, I'd have you know!"

"How do *we* manage then?"

The kneader picked up the loaf and put it in the basket.

"Hep! Another—quick!" cried the corporal.

Darboise caught the second in its flight and just managed to throw it into the basket, though his arm was hindering him. But he could not suppress an exclamation. He rubbed his hands and looked at them. On the right hand, a big blister was rising; and to add to it all, the two plotters were writhing with laughter.

"Whore-fingers!" said the kneader, with a shrug of his shoulders.

It was too much, and Jean said: "That's enough for me."

"Eh?"

"I'm chucking it."

"You'll chuck it when you're told to!" said the corporal; "now then, quickly!"

Pale with anger, Darboise walked away a few steps. The big oven-tender came to the edge of his pit. "There's going to be hell to pay! He's giving us the go-by in the end, that chap!"

Pincivy, one of the squad, was passing near by, helping another to push a laden trolley. Jean made him such an imperious sign that he stopped: "What's up?"

"It's this way—I burn myself every time I touch their bullets, and I can't go on——"

Quietly Pincivy said: "Ah, they didn't tell you then? I'm not surprised. Hogs!"

"Tell me what?"

"How to catch them—underneath, mind! Where it doesn't get as hot!"

The two pals had seen that Pincivy was explain-

ing, and held their sides in merriment. Jean's anger increased.

"Well then, they're rotten devils!" he cried, turning towards them.

"Say that again!" shouted the corporal, whose puffy face was contracting.

"I say again, it's the trick of cads not to give me the tips——"

"You hear him, eh? You're my witness——"

"Go for him. He wants his nose wiping," said the assistant.

"It's *you* that can happen to any minute!" retorted Jean, white with fury. "There are bullets wasted at the front that'd be better placed in your body!"

He had made a step towards them, and Pincivy was trying to hold him back. With an agility that no one would have believed in him, the corporal jumped out of his pit. With convulsive features, the fat man came close up to Jean:

"To hell with you, my lad, and to hell with you, and to hell with you; and for what you've just said. I'll see the gaoler gets you!"

The scene began to create a disturbance in the "tent." From adjoining ovens, several inquisitive people came up—a warning that sobered Darboise, but a stimulus to the other, on the contrary, for he pushed forward, taking advantage of his weight, drove him against the trolley, and howled in his face: "If you were only a corporal yourself, you'd damned well get one of these fists!"

"Come on, then!" Instinctively, Jean sought the defensive attitude—an enthusiastic boxer, formerly—but his unlucky arm refused to perform the duty required of it. He tried to break away and get more room on his right, but the kneader was there, and sneakingly pushed him back, gripping with both hands Jean's only sturdy shoulder. There was a quick scuffle between them; then Pincivy and others separated them.

"The sergeant! Where's the sergeant?" shouted the big corporal as he savagely rolled his sleeves back on his brawny arms. "I promise you there'll be a shindy about this!"

The head of the "tent" was absent just then, but the tarpaulin at the entry was drawn aside and Gandolphe appeared. He came up with his tranquil step, adjusting his eyeglasses: "What's happening?"

"Your little blackguard there's slanging me!"

"Which of you's doing the slanging?" The sergeant made a sign to Pincivy, as a witness to be trusted, and took him aside a moment. "Good, good; I see," he said, leaving him.

The corporal, instead of returning to his oven, remained planted opposite Jean. Haughtily he went on: "My God! Calling me a cad! It's not going to end there!"

"Darboise," said the sergeant, "you'd better apologize to the corporal."

Jean shook his head. "No, no!" he said.

Gandolphe went up to him and whispered:

"Look here, old chap. I know him; he's a dirty beast! Don't you get yourself into trouble——"

"I don't want his apologies, anyway!" cried the big man.

"You needn't fear that!" replied Jean.

"Darboise, don't be obstinate."

"I tell you he can whistle for my apology!"

Jean felt that all eyes were focussed on him—all hostile or curious, none friendly. They were watching his humiliation. His cheeks and his eyes were blood-red. A blast of madness and rebellion urged him—the memory of so many wrongs and disgraces already heaped on him; and he shouted: "I say it again, let them go to the front, all that crowd of shirkers! They'd find out there if they could treat men like that! I say—I say——"

He struggled to release himself from Sergeant Gandolphe's hand which had just been slipped over his mouth. Panting with fury, he broke away: "And you, too! You back each other up! All alike! *You* haven't been under fire, either! You don't know what men are——"

"Be quiet! Will you be silent?" thundered the sergeant.

"No—I've had enough of you—you make me sick, you make me sick, all of you—all of you!"

Looking round the circle of listeners, Darboise saw an opening and dashed through it, jostling his companions. In two or three seconds, he was outside, and in that sudden darkness he walked

straight forward, bewildered, his heart torn with bitterness.

Mechanically he avoided the Office of Staff, in front of which Moulin and Dubus were talking, pipe in mouth.

He had made a detour, going round a motionless train, when suddenly the gleam of lanterns and the sound of footsteps and voices swarmed in the dark.

"There he is! Stop him!" They were looking for *him!*

Then Jean began to run, heedlessly, like an animal found by the huntsmen. Along by the walls of the joiners' shops he ran. At the northern exit of the hangar, the sentry presented his bayonet, but, confused, let him slip by. He passed a "funk-hole" and more waggons. The darkness was intense, but the light from the lanterns of the pursuers—some of them had taken a short cut—shone feebly on him.

The quay was near, now. Should he throw himself into the water? Ah, but for that childish hope of Andrée's return! The massive outline of an English ship showed up, and Jean thought of hiding on board and letting himself be taken away in the depths of the hold. He ran with a new impulse, but stumbled against a chain between two posts, fell full length, and grazed his knees.

He got up again, and just then the moon came from behind the clouds and shone on him. Gan-

dolphe, a lantern in his hand, appeared before him: "Where are you going?"

He did not reply, but drew back two paces. Other running shadows were converging on him. Jean sprang forward. The sergeant opened wide his arms to bar his passage. Then deliberately, with his right fist, Jean struck him full in the face.

Gandolphe uttered an exclamation and his arms fell. Jean was slipping by him—saved! But the other treacherously tripped him, and throwing his arms up, he fell heavily again.

BOOK VII

CHAPTER I

JEAN'S MISERY

"How many degrees, Sister?"

"Still a little fever!"

"How many?"

Without answering, the nun carried the thermometer away. Lying in the hospital bed, Darboise was under no delusion. By his consuming thirst, the noisy turbulence of the blood in his forehead, the fierceness of the fire that burned in his flesh, he knew the gravity of his consuming illness.

Considering himself, he saw bad omens in the discoloured expectoration torn from his chest, in his increasing sense of oppression, in the vomiting which forbade him any nourishment. On the second day he had discovered the name of his malady—pneumonia. He knew that in that disease the sixth day was decisive—death or recovery. All depends on the vigour the heart has left; and his, alas, was too much shaken.

Long spells of insomnia were wearing him out. With staring eyes he recalled the other night's

happenings: seized by the collar and lifted up, after his fall at Gandolphe's feet; led away, detained and watched at the Office of Staff; the secret meeting that followed between witnesses and non-coms., his summons to confront them, and his obstinate refusal to answer the least question.

Led back to quarters, he had to wait, first, until the "chief" got up, and then it was that he caught cold. Then he must wait, until nine in the morning, the captain's coming, whose instant verdict, when the story was told him, was "Prison!"

At once he was steered to the Guilleminot fort, handed over to the Customs officer on duty, and put into a dark room, where he found Pichereau, guilty of having "pinched" a day when last on leave. There Jean sank down, feeling obscurely ill. A few hours later, the sinister shivering seized him.

Removed to the hospital, he had been two nights in bed in this bright room, where eleven other beds were ranged in rows. That night he had fallen into delirium which hardly gave him respite for thirty-six hours. It took the form of a nightmare of grievous besettings—the bullied toil at the Textile, a skirmish with Dubus, Gandolphe standing in his way with outspread arms, himself falling, a struggle, and a full-faced blow! Sometimes the illusions took him back to another time—that pallid dawn, the snow-covered mounds, the heroic thrill through the ranks—"Shall you get there,

boys?"—"We shall get there"—the bugles sounding the glorious charge of Douaumont.

His brief intervals of intelligence were marked by the cessation of his excitement and the obduracy of his reserve, and by a gloomy look of despair in his eyes. In vain the Sister tried to cheer him up with those simple pleasantries which succeeded so well with others.

At the bottom of Jean's misery there was first of all a lively resentment against the whole human race. And then a thought tormented him in spite of himself. He would have thrust it away had he retained control of himself—"Oh, Andrée, what have you against me?"

Dead for him! He hated her. It was delightful torture to him to resurrect his grievances against her, from that crafty flight up to the hateful return of her wedding-ring. Ah, how he had been deceived sometimes, in imagining her enfranchised in comparison with him, and made serenely free to follow her own ends. He pictured her in her mother's power, and collapsed in tears. Now, they would both be communing with each other in their pitiful hatreds, their childish inability to understand human frailty. No forgiveness! The foolish doctrine of the irreparable, the unpardonable! Sometimes he wished for revenge. Doubtless there was only one within his reach. Andrée had in vain gloried in implacable severity. If she suddenly heard of *his* death, the only man for her, he gloated over the hope that she would be

seized with dismay and remorse. So he longed ferociously for the sixth day to come.

And then, lo, this very idea ended by affecting him. He thought of his wife suddenly thunder-struck, sobbing—and it moved him to pity. He thought of her in the widow's veil, convulsively clasping their little child in her arms, the little innocent who would not understand, the fatherless child. Ceasing to storm against Andrée he made excuses for her; he understood the hatred she felt, for it was born of her love!

He would not go to the length of absolute self condemnation. He was too deeply imbued with the conviction that his fault was inevitable and that his heart had not sinned at all. It was the cruellest thing of all to him, this feeling that the misery fallen on their lives perhaps proceeded from a series of chances ironically ordered by fate. If he had not come to St. Pol? If he had had different neighbours? But for the fevered excitement of that night of the air-raid? But for the monstrous conditions, ye gods, of this war, and the base temptations into which it had thrown him?

Thus the chains tightened again upon him. His hatred slipped back into the fire of the old familiar furnace. He was a victim of the war—always the source of universal misery! Since this nameless tyranny was sounding the death-rattle of individual liberty in Europe, along with his own independence, his right to order his own

life, along with the joys of that honest life which he only asked to spend with his wife and child—since by this tyranny he had to be crucified, what could he do but hope for deliverance in three days?

He fell again into delirium. All one night he talked aloud, cursing the horror of the time. Even the Sister was frightened by overheard fragments of talk which she thought seditious. She inquired: What did they know about this little soldier?

It troubled her to hear from an attendant that he had been brought there straight from prison. She thought it her duty to inform the head surgeon. But Dr. Alquier, a 'worthy fellow, declared: "It's all foolishness, that! The important thing is to get him out of it."

The major was secretly affected by the fate of this lad, in danger of dying here, at the remotest end of France, and cut off from affection! From Gandolphe, who came more than once for news, he learned that his patient was married. Why not send for his wife? He even mentioned it to Darboise, who thanked him, and murmured: "We've made a mess of it, and separated!"

"One makes it up, at adverse times!"

"No; I would rather—she knew nothing."

Should they disregard his wish? That was the feeling both of Alquier and Gandolphe. But unfortunately the home address had just then gone astray, through some carelessness at the Bureau. Gandolphe then began to hunt up Jean's cousins at

Malo, whose name even he did not know, so forty-eight hours more were lost.

The critical day arrived. The morning Darboise spent in feverish excitement. He threw off the bedclothes; his face was distorted as he repeated fierce imprecations on his enemies, real or imaginary. It was above all against Gandolphe that his rage was aroused—the man who took the side of his torturers, ordered him to beg pardon, roughly shut his mouth, and then barred his way. Opening his eyes once he thought he saw him behind the glass door. He jumped up and tried to get out of bed—"No! Don't let him come to mock me!" He would not have gone far on his poor shaky legs.

Towards noon, a sudden torpor succeeded to his frenzy. That was the most alarming phase, that in which the patient's heart weakens, and he may slip through one's fingers. His pulse grew slower and feebler. The major, who came expressly at two o'clock, injected something, and the Sister held a bag of oxygen to his lips.

The d'Estignards, at last informed, hastened to the hospital. They were not allowed in the ward, but were received by Gandolphe. Hearing their astonished questions, "Why is his wife not there?" the sergeant scented a mystery; they had not been told, then, of the parting?—which surprised him, too.

They said they would wire to Andrée, and he dissuaded them, thinking that it would only be a

torture for the dying man. For excuse, he gave them the affair at the Textile, which must be settled first, and he pretended not to think Jean in great danger.

But he was seized with remorse when, before going away, he was allowed to glance at Darboise, along with little Véchaud, whom he had told of the illness. They were horrified at the emaciated face, the short and whistling breath. Silence hovered in the room and people walked on tiptoe. It seemed as if they were arranging a funeral vigil already.

CHAPTER II

A HEAVY BLOW

AND then at nine o'clock at night, the fever suddenly abated and the oppression decreased. The night was more tranquil, and the next day the surgeon and the Sister smiled at each other.

"Saved?"

"He's returning from a long way off!"

The convalescence was speedy. After three days he knew the delight of returning appetite—and of the golden "mouillette," which goes straight from egg to mouth. He felt that he had turned a corner, a sort of rejuvenation.

At once he found, among his companions of the ward, some good comrades, like those whom he used to reckon at the front. How many games of cards they played! Maxence, a thin-faced corporal, made a stay of several days at his side, and he was a chess-player. Wounded and sent back from the Somme, he was a bold optimist, of real geniality; a fearless fellow whom the length of the war in no way discouraged, and who whistled his way through the storm like a Paris sparrow. His stay in hospital coincided with the French advance

of the end of August. Combles was seriously threatened, and the French reaction in front of Verdun found Darboise affected—*his* Verdun!

And when now he recalled from time to time the worst cause of his trouble, the break-up of his home, it was curious that the situation no longer seemed to him quite so tragic. He put off until another day writing again to Andrée—as long as she did not forestall him! The chains that bound them together were so mighty! He felt coming to life again within him a carnal ardour the object of which was no longer doubtful. In his fleeting memories of Germaine, he was struck with astonishment. Was he capable of another such weakness? She was only a passer-by! Half restored to confidence in himself, persuaded that she was getting over it, and that the old woman had laid down her weapons (since he heard no more mention of that affair), his only wish was to cast a veil over the mistake of a moment.

His surroundings satisfied him. Visitors would have annoyed him. As soon as his convalescence was certain, the d'Estignards had asked if he would see them. Jean wondered by whom they had been kept informed. As he had just looked at himself in the mirror and had taken offence at his faded looks and fortnight's beard, he had sent word that he was resting.

Véchaud came the next day, was admitted, and stayed twenty minutes; he was very amiable but not very interesting. He had hardly gone when

the nun appeared again: "The sergeant wants to know if he can come too and say good-day to you."

"What sergeant?"

"The one who often comes."

Surprised, Jean asked her to describe him. If he had a short beard and eyeglasses, he thought he knew—"Yes, let him come in!"

It was Gandolphe in fact. There was a dark place on his nose, the mark of Jean's fist.

No longer inflamed against him as in his delirious hours, but still hostile towards him, Jean was chilly, and let him flounder about among conventional remarks. But he asked him: "It wasn't you, by chance, that told my cousins?"

"Yes, it was."

"Did you know them?"

"I'd saluted them, before."

Darboise suppressed an ungracious remark, but he drummed with his fingers on the sheets in a way which told of his irritation.

When he was on the point of withdrawing, the sergeant said: "About that case of yours——"

"Well?" Jean looked at him. His case? An anxiety, that, which he had been wrong to cut out of his thoughts. Was there some fresh development? As he was about to put a straight question, a foolish pride stopped him.

"I'm looking after it," said the sergeant, "and I haven't given up hope——" and he went away.

What had he come for? Was he wanting thanks

for not having envenomed (as it seemed) his story of all those unlucky scenes at the "bakery"? Instead of gratitude, Jean felt only unjustifiable irritation towards him by whose fault his time of tranquillity had come to an end.

For the very next day, the captain and the lieutenant were announced, and they came to examine. For this occasion, Fauvel had thought he ought to decorate himself in the uniform he reserved for great occasions, and comically added his helmet and revolver, considering himself on duty. Obviously it was he who was directing and pressing the matter. Papa Meunier had looked at his watch as he came in, which meant that he had left his fishing-tackle outside the door.

The interrogatory began.

"Let us hear your version," said the lieutenant, with overdone gravity.

Darboise had to resurrect the scene at the Textile. In this, he was taken at a disadvantage, for he had up till now dismissed the scene from his memory, instead of thinking it over and arranging it so that it would sound a plausible plea when the time came to present it. So it was an impromptu story, under the gaze of Fauvel, whose frequent interruptions, incriminating or imbecile, nearly drove him to distraction.

A main cause of vexation to Jean was the meanness of the part he had played in the matter—the unfortunate drudge, rebelling against the whims of his masters! It was evident from his

explanations that he had been deficient in his duty, which, after all consisted of "holding himself at the disposition" of the bake-house corporal.

"That's the point," said Fauvel decisively; "you had no right to argue, and especially to refuse to obey."

"I did not refuse——"

"*He* says you did."

In vain Darboise argued the outrageous attitude of the two cronies, and his own patience. It was labour thrown away. Fauvel repeated: "It's very serious!"

So, wanting to know where he was, Jean began to ask questions in his turn:

"In short, then, how does the—the matter stand?"

"It's—following its course."

"What of it? The complaint? Is there a complaint?"

"Several!"

"From whom?"

Fauvel's deprecating gesture suggested professional discretion:

"All I can say is—that the reports concur."

Darboise insisted: "Is it—really a matter—of a court-martial?"

"I don't think you'll escape that!"

"I thought—Sergeant Gandolphe told me—that he hoped——"

"Gandolphe?" the lieutenant snorted, with a

shrug of his shoulders, "it's he who attacks you the most!"

Darboise was left in consternation. The blow was a mortally heavy one. The sergeant's attitude hitherto had given him the innocent idea that his worst mistake, his real fault, that of bruising the face of a superior officer, had been passed over. Now he was roughly overcome by a certainty of the contrary. He had trusted in appearances, in Gandolphe's pretended solicitude towards him. Yet he was an officer, and no doubt he felt himself obliged, by virtue of his stripes, etc. ! In making out his report, no doubt he did not feel at liberty to omit any of the facts—*the fact* ! Perhaps he had been satisfied to relate them without malice; perhaps he had even spoken—the simpleton!—of extenuating circumstances. Either way, it seemed to Darboise that his danger was evident; yes, the court-martial! And they don't trifle in these court-martials in the zone of war! Assault and battery on a non-com.! No one could say that the verdict would not be death. At the least, five or ten years of hard labour! Ten years! Jean laughed to himself, a little jerky laugh. Ten years! He shrank visibly. No, he would not submit to that! Should he—should he——?

But he declined to come to a decision yet—some providential path might open before him, some solace appear. (But what? He had a presentiment of one, and dared not confess it to himself.)

But his whole enfeebled soul went out in vehement bitterness against Gandolphe, the impostor who was there but yesterday! Ah, how Jean hated him—more than Fauvel, more than Dubus!

But Gandolphe seemed to have got wind of the unmasking of his duplicity. One, two, three days went by and there was no word of him.

CHAPTER III

CHRISTIAN, A MARINE

As Dr. Alquier passed Jean's bed that morning he handed a paper to him in silence. It was a "service note" from the Bureau, asking "on what date approximately the soldier Darboise, under treatment at Hospital 49, would be in a condition to be recommitted to the Guilleminot Prison."

"What are you replying, major?"

"I'm telling them—not to worry me. Seriously, did one ever hear such an idea?"

The surgeon laughed: "I don't regard you yet as convalescent; and, by gad, just to rile them, I'm wondering whether I won't send you away 'in convalescence.' Besides, from what I know of your affair, they're exaggerating, they're running riot."

Darboise feared the indiscretion of a direct questioning, but the major was called away.

The menace over him had leaked out, and curiosity was kindled; it was chattered about in the ward. And at night, Darboise's new neighbour, a marine called Christian, catechised him:

"Is it true that you've come out of quod?"

"Yes."

"And—that you're going back?"

"Possibly!"

"What have you done, old pal?"

Darboise shrugged his shoulders: "I gave 'em back-talk, to be sure!"

The marine lowered his voice: "Is it all bunkum that you—pitched one of 'em into the canal?"

Jean began to laugh: "Not that. But in the end—there was one of 'em I—handed a clout to!"

"Did you dare, old pal? You're a trump!" murmured the other, admiringly.

They talked till late, in undertones, that night. And the following days cemented their unexpected friendship.

To begin with, they had quickly discovered points in common: They had both been wounded—they were of those who had the right to talk! They were not of that soft-job crowd of which there was one in that very ward. (They meant young Rocher, a senator's nephew, whom they had just put into hospital to be coddled for the Reserve.) Especially were they both rebels—that was their rallying-cry—rebels against what they had seen and suffered in the course of those two years.

This Christian had no doubt been a good sort in civil life—he had been employed by a cab proprietor at Choisy-le-Roy. As a result of the war, he was changing for the worse. He had made the great blunder, he said, of enlisting when he

was eighteen—he belonged to Class '17. Wounded, put into the Reserve, he had been taken again as “fit,” and wounded once more. This time he was crippled—his right hand and wrist were useless. So they had turned him into the “auxiliary,” where they had “chivvied” him so, he said, between examinations and re-examinations that he had asked if he might go back and be finished off at the front.

He had come from his depot, almost literally vomiting up the sights he had seen: “When they know, after the war! But they won’t know;—where shall we be?”

As he talked, Jean rediscovered all the bitter discouragement which had taken the place of the generous enthusiasm found in his own heart at the beginning. Christian returned continually to this physical defect, this mutilation which would prevent him from following his employment ever again. Certainly he would refuse to let himself be taught another:

“I shall tell those chaps that took me out of the Reserve last year that they can support me now,—I’m a charge on their hands.”

“They’re more likely to stop your pension!”

“I know. They’re trying to work it already. They want me to be ‘re-examined’ next year. I’m waiting to see them at it. Look out for the sack, the day when they fall out with us for good, us, the five hundred thousand knocked out!”

The light of spite and suffering flamed in his

eyes. One saw in him a man bereft of all magnanimous feelings, a wanderer ripening for prison—or perhaps worse. He drank, of course. How did he manage to get rum for himself every day? Jean declined when it was offered him, and dared not try to dissuade him from seeking refuge from his troubles in it.

He was a very different type from Decante. Darboise's way of looking at things was widening, but it showed him only a horizon pregnant with storm. He began to foresee the horror of the social convulsions which would turn Europe upside down tomorrow. This man was a sample of the hungry rebels who would come up to the gates of those in high places to proclaim their responsibility as fomenters of the catastrophe, to demand their heads, even were they to pay for it with their own.

Observe that Christian's friendship, their proclaimed intimacy, was not long in prejudicing Jean in the eyes of the other inmates of the ward. The marine lost no chance of uttering his revolutionary opinions, and notably in the matter of religion, which involved open war with the Sister. Darboise and he ended by forming a separate company. The nun, already cool towards Jean by what she knew of his "affair," now dropped him definitely and even accused him of ingratitude. She did not hesitate to express aloud her wish for the departure of "those two."

She slyly tried to turn the head surgeon against Jean, but did not succeed. On the contrary

Alquier showed more interest in him every day, stopping by his pillow every morning to say a few words to him. Once he questioned him: "You are an artist?"

"Yes, major."

"Have you been able to do anything since the beginning of the war?"

Jean mentioned the few things he had finished last winter, at Cavalaire.

"Cavalaire? I know it. Who was looking after you down there?"

"It was—my wife." Darboise blushed.

A good sort! Jean, acquiring confidence, put a question to him one day when the other had just applied the stethoscope. The top of his right lung—was there still a suspicious spot?

"Suspicious? It will be that all your life. I should propose you for the Reserve, but—well, there! They send home only those who have caves in their lungs! But quite certainly you're affected, and if you're not very careful——"

The frankness of the statement did not fail to trouble Darboise, and he tossed about all night. Ah, what confirmation of the major's words! He was still coughing; he was still thinner; and suddenly he noticed that light sweating on his legs. He was on the perilous descent! And if that was to be his future, that menace of the court-martial that he must rot in prison——?

In vain had he diverted his thoughts from that prospect. It forced itself on him. Actually his

own physical and moral exhaustion were the first steps towards the tomb, from which the prison-cell is not far removed. Ah, what revulsion constrained him against that fate! No. He confronted the position. If he had really to be tried, and if he were condemned—well then! One impulse of energy might at least commute his sentence!

Why should he not kill himself? Who would mourn for him? He went through a mental list of his friends, of the youth among whom his own life had begun. Not one was left, not one—save Auguères, the last of his comrades of the good old days! Earnestly he wished he could see him again; he would write to him—tomorrow!

And Andrée?—a voice whispered to him.

And at once another voice, a sneering one, arose, his voice in her, the voice of her who abandoned and repelled him, who was the prime cause of his misfortunes. It left him in the same stage of hatred, of desire to do her harm in his turn. That very night he determined the wording of the cynical deceitful letter in which he would lay his death at her door, the letter which he swore should be found on him—in any event.

CHAPTER IV

GOOD NEWS

HE was chatting with Christian when the latter said: "A non-com.!"

Jean turned his head towards the door, and his blood rushed back to his heart. Gandolphe, brazening it out! Unless he was simply unconscious——?

With tranquil face and steady eyes the sergeant came up and said, "Good morning!"

Darboise saw the outstretched hand. He had never in his life refused his own to any one. Yet this time he withheld it—though he had to press hard to keep it down on the sheet. Three eternal seconds went by. Then Gandolphe drew back a step:

"Well, what's up, Darboise?" he said, in a changed tone, "you don't want to shake hands with me?"

"I'd rather not," replied Jean in a colourless voice.

The sergeant had gone very white. Making as if he was going away, he added: "So much the worse for you!"

With all his strength Darboise wished that the man would really go. But Gandolphe was master of himself again. He went to fetch a chair, came back, and sat down, and said seriously:

"Why have you such a grudge against me?"

"I don't like—two-faced people."

"And—and I'm one of them?"

"Yes."

"Darboise," the sergeant went on, "you want to hurt me. You've done it, as a matter of fact; you're unjust. But I think you're the victim of some illusion. I have a horror of misunderstandings. What have you got against me?"

"I—I can't see that your behaviour——"

"In what?"

"I want nothing from you! You come to see me here; you pose as a friend; and at the same time I know that you're making a report against me."

"Ah, it's a matter of the report?"

"Quite enough, surely!"

"I was forced to do it."

"Forced?" Jean jumped at the word and his anger flamed up again: "Forced? By the regulations? By the habit of discipline? It was a penalty you had to have, eh? And you'll send me to the court-martial? Right you are! I shall go. And I swear that if either you or the corporal's expecting apologies, you can whistle for them. I don't care a damn for the lot of you, understand me. I'll repeat anywhere you like

what I gave *you* in the face and what's enraged you; I'll repeat that we're fed up with being bullied here at Dunkerque by chaps like you that have never risked your skins——!"

Rising from his seat, Gandolphe had several times tried to interrupt, but had every time been silenced by the cataract of words. It was only now that the sergeant could say, looking at the Sister, "Your patient is still feverish!"

"No," said the nun, frowning, and chagrined as well by the disturbance, "he's only too much in his right mind!"

"That's what I am!" cried Jean, sitting up on the bed with crimson face. "I know what I'm doing, and what I'm saying!" Seeking a tender spot, he cried again: "Let me tell you—I don't regret that blow! I'm glad to see that you're still marked after a fortnight!"

As Gandolphe, still unmoved, allowed his eyes to wander round the room Jean shouted:

"I suppose you're looking for witnesses again?" Then to his neighbour: "I say, Christian, you'll bear me out that I haven't said—half what I've got to say?"

The marine smiled sneeringly at the non-com., who had indeed come to the right people to hear about his faults. Darboise was silent, content that he had burned his boats. Gandolphe's position was becoming extremely delicate. The atmosphere was hostile to him; for even the sensible ones in the ward were obviously con-

vinced that for Darboise to be driven to such an extreme of imprudence—ah, what must he have suffered at the hands of that non-com.! The nun, too, made a quiet attempt to show the visitor out.

“Excuse me, Sister,” said Gandolphe, “I’ve got something to say which might be useful.”

“You can come again another day,” she said deprecatingly; “today, when he’s unnerved——”

“Excuse me,” the sergeant insisted; “since this is what I came for.”

He took again from the Sister’s hands the chair which she was moving away from the bed, and placed it by Jean’s pillow. Then Jean, disgusted at such a lack of dignity, rolled over with a movement of insulting contempt, and turned his back.

The sergeant was not rebuffed: “Your affair—I was bringing you—good news,” he said.

In a low voice—what need to let the whole ward know?—he began to set out the course which things had taken and were taking. He took the matter back to its beginning. A report? Certainly; he had been careful to write one on the spot. Why? Because it was the only item capable of weighing in the balance against the effect of the other account, the one that the bake-house corporal had scribbled in an access of rage. It was an awkward task. Straightforwardly, the sergeant besought Jean to say if it were not so. He had reported nothing but what was absolutely true. He had apportioned the wrong, accused

the bakehouse section of harshness and their "drudge" of a liveliness in language which he regretted. It was possible on both sides that they had been mistaken in the other's words. His conclusion, in short, was divided responsibility.

Not a word did Gandolphe say of the—the principal fact, and Jean did not know what to think.

"I palliated things as much as I could," the sergeant went on, "and Morinet was even furious. He refused to hand my report on or to receive it. You know how they all hang together at the depot. I had to have a set-to with him."

As Jean showed not the least sign of changing his attitude, Gandolphe said: "You don't believe me?" He fumbled in his pockets: "I want to read you the rough draft of that report so that you may judge of my purpose."

He read it to Jean, and it was a marvel of discretion. There was no allusion in it—Jean was on the look-out for it—to the personal outrage he had endured.

"So you see!" the sergeant concluded, folding his paper: "Seeing that the two reports mutually cancelled each other, they remained some time without coming to a decision. I ought to have told you that the brigadier was away on leave. Up to yesterday, mind, I was afraid we could not get you out of—the court-martial. Today I came to tell you that—I think—after the steps

taken by—after the steps taken, the proceedings are averted.”

At this point only, Jean consented to turn round. In a weary tone he said: “I assure you I didn’t care, that I don’t care about anything!”

“That shouldn’t be so.”

“That’s how it is, all the same!”

In truth he was now far from feeling the delight that should have arisen. Remorse was creeping in—this poor Gandolphe, wrongly judged after all! He who believed he was bringing his salvation!

Desirous of renewing the conversation, and curious as well to elucidate a point that was puzzling him, he said: “But you said—that some one had taken steps on my account?”

“Certainly.”

“Who?”

“Some friends—of yours.”

“Some friends?” The word smote Jean, who thought himself so solitary in the world. He looked at Gandolphe. Friends? An idea crossed his mind——.

“It wasn’t—it wasn’t——” He hesitated to say the name of the d’Estignards. The thought that they were acquainted with the whole business—and Andrée might be also!—was so unpleasant to him that he said it only in a doubtful, almost aggressive tone:

“I hope you haven’t——?”

“Yes. Your cousins, in the first place,” the other said; “I fancied that, with their influence——”

Jean's face was clouded again.

"It was necessary to save you, anyhow. I'm not sorry. If M. d'Estignard could not do anything himself, at least it was through him that I was able, seeing they were very intimate, to set the doctor going."

"What doctor?"

"Alquier."

"The major?"

"Exactly; and he went to see the Superintendent of the dockyard."

The ramifications of this involved plot, with this explanation of Dr. Alquier's attitude of late, all struck Jean as belonging to the realm of romance. He was divided between two feelings. It irritated his misanthropy that so many people had busied themselves on his behalf and without his knowledge, yet he was touched with gratitude at the same time because they had acted, as Gandolphe said, with friendly intent.

His eyes were fixed on Gandolphe, who was waiting in an awkward attitude and apparently heedless. He looked past the reddish beard and the wrinkled forehead to meet and join the straight and candid gaze; and so that his apology might be seen by the watching witnesses just as his insults had been, he raised himself and held out his hand:

"I've behaved like a brute; will you forgive me, sergeant?"

.

The same evening, Jean tried to thank Dr. Alquier, but he stopped him at once. Pooh! His part had ended with whispering a word to the Superintendent—"who didn't have to exert himself much; the man *you* should be grateful to is your friend the sergeant!"

"What has he done?"

"Don't you know?" Gandolphe, it appeared, had succeeded in interesting one of his old friends, a person of influence, who had sent a telegram to the depot that it was desired that the whole matter should be "arranged."

The good news had spread, and Darboise was overwhelmed with the congratulations of the ward.

"He desires not the death of the sinner!" said the Sister, and she offered up as sacrifice, to celebrate the event, two pots of plum jam.

Jean looked cheerfully upon all. In appearance careless and radiant, he was at heart morose. He was calling his reasons for living to account—if his home was broken up, what was the good of it? (Unless there should be a letter in a little while!)

Christian was the only one to notice that there was something artificial in his playfulness, and he asked him:

"Have you some other worries?"

For this intuition, Jean gave thanks with a friendly sigh. But—it wasn't to Christian that he would talk of Andrée. He regretted then his dear dead friends, the honest confidants of his

youth, like Templier, the first to whom he had spoken of his fiancée by her Christian name. The movement of his thoughts ended with the memory of Augères. How much would he not have given on such evenings as that, to be able to see him again without turning his head, to see him affectionate and thoughtful, in the next bed!

CHAPTER V

GANDOLPHE AND THE D'ESTIGNARDS

YET several days followed of recovered serenity. Relations had been established again between Jean and his ward-mates. He was less monopolised by Christian, who turned for sympathy elsewhere.

Darboise's stay in the hospital was beginning to exceed the anticipated limit, thanks to the kindness of the head surgeon.

"You're not badly off here, eh?" Alquier said.

"Oh, major! And compare it with what's waiting for me!" (Jean had reason to believe that he would go back to the Guilleminot Prison to finish his fifteen days.)

There were several other visitors. Véchaud came twice. The poor lad continued to bewail his quite uninteresting duties. Jean, whom he irritated, made sport of him, invoking Christian's aid to demoralise him still more by painting the future in the darkest colours, nor was there much that could be piled on.

Lavigne presented himself one fine day and Darboise was touched by the overture. But

they had to rack their brains to find a subject of conversation. The sergeant mopped his forehead and repeated that it was thirsty weather: "I'm superintending the boys. How are they?—In summer, you know, I've got to drink all the time——"

Monade and Cazenave took advantage of a Sunday at last, and called: "Ah, now one may come and see you!" said the adjutant as he entered. They feared to commit themselves while the "affair" was still hanging on.

Jean assumed a curious coldness towards them, which they pretended not to notice. Cazenave even displayed "cheek." As they threatened to make him a sentry, he said, he had hungry eyes on some secretarial job at the D.E.S.; and he, Darboise, who had backers in the dockyard superintendent's office and elsewhere, couldn't he, if need be——?

"If I had any, I should keep them to myself!"

As they took their leave, Monade said to Jean, without seeing anything unkind in it: "We'll try to come again, old chap, before you're in prison again!"

The only one who regularly put himself out was Gandolphe. He used to come at the right time after lunch, and bring books for the convalescent: "I'm not wearying you?"

A natural subject of conversation was the works which Darboise had been able to run through the day before—masterpieces carefully chosen by the

sergeant—Zola, Tolstoy, Daudet; and Gandolphe also brought Barbusse's *Le Feu* to his notice. It was beginning to appear in *L'Œuvre*,—a cry of sincerity and genius, welcomed all over France with immense relief. They argued about things, but Jean did not show any animation. Not that he had any contempt for his visitor. On the contrary, he thought him intelligent and well-read, and less pedantic than he had usually believed him.

More than once, the sergeant seemed to try hard to draw him into political matters. Jean avoided the discussion, convinced that the boldness of his disillusionment would only and unprofitably shock this upright university man. For still weightier reasons, Jean hastened to change the subject when the sergeant seemed to be clearing a way for personal confidences. He had heard but lately from Cazenave of the successive misfortunes which had fallen on Gandolphe. He had become a widower shortly before the cataclysm and had heard that his children had died in the enemy-occupied country. Jean was careful not to start him on that subject, fearing both a too diffuse discourse, and also that the other would gather courage to question him in his turn.

One day when the sergeant was there, the d'Estignards were announced. Jean had sent them a note and had expected them for several days.

It was the whole family. Madame d'Estignard went up to Darboise and kissed him: "May I—an old mother?"

Friendly outpourings followed. They talked of the pneumonia, of which hardly a trace seemed left. Then Jean expressed his gratitude—yes, that scrape of his, he knew what kindness they had shown.

Monsieur d'Estignard declined thanks—they were due chiefly to another, and he turned towards Gandolphe, who had taken his cap and seemed on the point of going.

Darboise noticed a kind of familiarity between his cousins and the sergeant, and felt a certain uneasiness stirring in him. How far had the exchange of confidences about him gone? What allusions to Andrée had passed between them? It was probable that they were all on the scent, all. It was already significant that each one of them abstained from even mentioning the name of his wife! Indeed, was it not possible that they on their side had been exerting themselves, and had written to Sceaux? Looking at the faces of those two women, whereon he read encouraging kindness, hope burned again within him. If Andrée had been shocked and moved to pity? If she were to show her face again, or if only a note of forgiveness——?

Gandolphe did not linger, and when he had gone, M. d'Estignard returned to his praises: "You've got a devoted friend there!"

"You should have seen him," said Sylvaine, "the evening when he came to look us up at home! What a state he was in! It was looking hopeless for you, that threat of the court-martial. He persuaded papa to go immediately to the surgeon——"

"Fortunately! The next day would have been too late!"

"Yes, yes," said Jean, "he has a good heart."

"A professor, isn't he? But is he a Fellow?"

"I don't think so."

"It's a pity," said the old lady, "that he's rather—how shall I put it?" She was seeking words with no unkindness in them: "I would say 'provincial' if we were not provincials ourselves!"

"There's nothing of the flirt about him!" said Sylvaine.

"No—and above all, nothing up-to-date, nothing fashionable."

Darboise took it on himself to give them an insight into Gandolphe's domestic disasters, but cut it short at sight of their inattentive expression.

However, towards the end of the week, chance brought the sergeant and the d'Estignards again at the same time; and that day, the young lady having casually mentioned her singing, which she was studying again, Gandolphe ventured to ask her: "Really? You are a musician, mademoiselle?"

Jean pushed him forward, figuratively, telling that the sergeant was an artist as well, and the

delight of his mess. Gandolphe denied being a virtuoso, but confessed that he wondered what would have become of him, without his piano, in the dark hours of his life.

"I, too," said Sylvaine; "there are people who think that mirth and music——"

They talked a little on the subject that was drawing them together, and sang the praises of their favourite composers. M. d'Estignard said to Gandolphe: "You must come and see us some day. You shall accompany my daughter's songs."

"Oh," said the old lady, "but Sylvaine is only pleased when she's in difficulties."

One felt her slightly ungracious caution in the matter of this non-com.'s musical culture. And he stood silently and modestly, as though entreating the one most interested for a word of encouragement. The young girl seemed to have fallen into one of her unaccountable moments of abstraction.

"That's so, eh, Sylvaine?" her father went on.

"Why, yes—certainly!" she said.

CHAPTER VI

A DECISION

FAUVEL had come to pay him—what? Yes, a friendly call! And to inform Jean that, thanks to his personal intervention, even the fifteen days of prison had been remitted.

Jean knew that he owed this last remission to Alquier, and was tempted to tell the hypocrite that he knew all he wanted to know on his account; but he restrained himself, knowing he must soon be again in the lieutenant's power, alas!

Ah, the protecting tone in which Fauvel gave him advice! "What we've found amiss in you, you know, is your lack of the military spirit. An artist in civil life, that's all right; but here, nothing but a 'second class,' eh?"

Fauvel seemed to take a delight in letting disagreeable news trickle slowly out:

"As you've been ill, your turn for leave will be put back, of course. And then—yes, there are new orders—the young men will no longer be allowed to sleep away from quarters."

"Brute! Brute!" exclaimed Darboise, almost before the door was shut.

The last piece of news was like a hammer-blow to him. No more sleeping in town? That was really the same thing as having to give up his room. There would no longer be a corner where he could recover after a day of serfdom; and instead there would be the promiscuity of the barrack-room. Until the next day he tried to think it was all an invention of Fauvel's; but Monade came to see him again and confirmed the news; and the idiot added with a laugh: "It will be Madame Darboise that grumbles, if she comes back!"

Jean asked him questions. What were the detachment saying and doing?

Well, after a fortnight of total idleness—yes, they had let the four hundred men fold their arms; and most of them were agriculturists who fretted their hearts out to be doing nothing when so much wanted doing at home!—orders had arrived the day before, at last.

"Are they returning to the Textile?"

"Yes, all the company; and that means, talking about days off,—napoo!"

The adjutant gave details of a hardly reassuring nature. The—the squad was in evil odour at present—perhaps on account of the Darboise affair—ah, that might very well be! The dirtiest fatigues were for them, and their non-coms. were obliged not to move a yard away from their men. The other night, at the "booze fatigue," some chaps were drunk, and there was a row and a

report, threats and lock-up, and now a rebellious spirit was stirring.

These remarks cast gloom on Jean's mind. Only a few days now separated him from his return to St. Pol, to wear the yoke of drudgery again. He would be returning to companions whose only welcome would be derision and ill-will. He would begin to live again under the rod of non-coms. in that stench of militarism, the Textile! Depussay and Dubus! To think that kindly folk had exerted themselves to save him from the court-martial! Really, compared with what lay in wait for him, would he not have preferred imprisonment?

His surroundings in the ward, too, were changed again. There were several newcomers of an unsympathetic sort; cases of serious illness, of whom little Navarro was one, coughing his lungs up.

Christian had just had a mishap—Alquier had found a litre of rum under his pillow; and at the end of a very violent scene, the major had decided to send him away in a few days: "Armed service you are—so much for you! You're all right for the trenches!"

Indignantly intrenched in his corner, the fellow invoked the opinion of Jean, who was inclined to tax the surgeon with going to extremes. Then Christian changed his tune, protested his horror of the firing line, his dread of returning yonder, his detestation of the war. He preached

open rebellion—bullets in the bodies of the bosses, as they used to say in the good old days! Any means at all to bring this beastliness to an end as soon as possible!

Jean nodded his head, and had not the strength to refute him. It was true that the war was the cause of universal misfortune and disgrace—the war that seemed to informed minds to be less near its end, after twenty-four months, than it did at the beginning!

Gandolphe's visits, which had become rather less frequent, no longer brought him more than a feeling of impatience. He was relieved to see him go, and had less liking for reading. One tedious morning he had taken a pencil and sketched the portrait of Christian, whose spiteful mobile face interested him. It was an abortive attempt, and the other poked fun at him.

How many cares he had! The money problem began to take urgent shape. There was no further reply from the Crédit Lyonnais, which had recently advised him of difficulties which prevented his last order to sell stock from being executed. He had thirty francs left in his pocket; a month's board and lodging was due to the Mafrancs, and the rent of the room in the Rue Jeanne d'Arc was still going on! The memory of his disputes with the Trousseliers arose again to engross his thoughts, as from the depths of a nightmare. He knew nothing more of the two women. It was to be hoped that the old one had given up her idea

of making a complaint, and the young one her plans to do away with herself and the babies. And when the husband returned, how the spiteful tongues would tell him all about it!

Darboise could not hide from himself that his physical strength was shaken. There was more of the light perspiration by night. He felt his pulse at night,—and would have asked for the thermometer had he not feared that Christian would poke fun at him—88, 90 to the minute! It was too high, undoubtedly, a feverish speed. Perhaps he was tuberculous in his bones. The military surgeons, of course, will only pronounce you attacked when you are at the last gasp, as they did for poor little Navarro, whose red cheek-bones, emaciation, and incessant cough seemed to Jean a clinical picture of what awaited him tomorrow.

Above all—and this was the darkest depth of his distress—days and weeks had gone by and Andrée had not written. Adamant in her accursed severity! And this the last beacon-light on the horizon was dying out.

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He would be leaving the hospital in a minute. His bundle was made up and he was only waiting for his “paper.” He had picked up a newspaper and was looking carelessly through it.

As soon as he had read the heading “Roll of Honour,” the printed words began to dance before

his eyes, and it was difficult to read them again. He felt that atrocious heart-pang that he knew too well, and leaned against the wall.

"What's up?" said Christian; "do you feel bad?"

"The last—of my best pals!"

"We shall all go that way, I tell you!"

The line in the list read: "Paul Auguères, son of Professor Auguères of the College of Physicians, killed in action on the Somme, aged 24 years."

"He, he too!" Jean murmured to himself for a dozen seconds, and then: "It had to be! I expected it!"

It was a loss which yielded to none in sadness. Yet it was strange that the blow found him less a prey to overpowering sorrow than to a kind of triumphant horror. He repeated: "I was expecting it!"

Almost coldly he witnessed the unrolling of the kindred pictures that always thronged before his eyes as each new bereavement was announced: the last sight of the departed one, the last letter received from him, his signature, the final flourish to it. And mechanically, as always, a procession of ghosts began to file across the background of his consciousness. Two years had gone by since the first ones were killed—Boussac at Spincourt, de Valpic at Roye. Lucien his boy-brother, moulded in the same flesh as himself, died in hospital, and was followed in a fortnight by their mother. The shapes of those who had disappeared proceeded more

rapidly—friends, comrades, chiefs, they who were neither friends nor enemies, those of Nanteuil, of La Chalade, of Douaumont, companions of a month or of an hour, down to the most recent—Templier, Fainze, Claude Boucheron. He had not the time to be engulfed in individual regrets—his feeling was one of stupor and almost of utter prostration. His capacity for feeling pain was like a machine that has locked. Then suddenly his heart contracted. He felt that fate was presenting to him a demand for payment. Before he could control the springs of his thought, he found himself face to face with a decision arrived at in the depths of his subconsciousness; he would struggle no more! It was only some minutes later, when he had become used to the dazzling idea and his vision was steadying, that he justified his resolution after it was made. Nothing, nothing in the world should turn him from it.

There was no deep philosophy in it; but merely the conviction that life was no longer to be wished for in this abominable epoch. Why go on? All the delights of reason, liberty, and art, for which men worthy of the name had expended themselves, were suppressed. In himself he saw a greater victim than most—physically reduced, morally debased, his trust and hope in humanity lost, gone even the desire to raise himself again, seeking only the speediest deliverance in this his last extremity! With cruel detachment he thought of Andrée and the child. Was it cowardice to leave

them? But it was her own choice. Besides, what else did he do but antedate things by a few months? His lungs were attacked, and he was condemned. A little sooner, or a little later! Since it was now only a question of dying, why had he not fallen at Verdun?

Gradually he advanced to a wider and more rational view of his plan, a more balanced conception of the truth, which is the only logic. Why was he only adopting it so late? Were not all his troubles there yesterday? Yes, of course; but this death of Auguères, of his last friend in the world, that was the last drop which made the cup overflow. For the essential sorrow was death—yes, death mowing down at random the best of the nations, this was the incurable abomination which made the air unfit to breathe. A wind of madness was blowing through the world. One had reached the negation of all progress, of all civilisation. One by one, all those he loved had been cut down. There was nothing left but to imitate them, to let himself fall in his turn, rather than suffer endlessly in this scene of barbarism among ever-increasing horrors! The times were accursed. The only path open henceforward before young men ran from the convict-prison to the hospital and the charnel-house; for amid the total rout of justice and beauty, Old Europe was rolling to its end, drunk with blood and tears!

Darboise had prodigiously regained control of himself. He made mental survey of the change

accomplished in him within a few weeks. Suppose he had escaped Gandolphe's tripping foot that night and had thrown himself into the oily water of the dock, it would have been an act of rash passion, with no calculation in it; whereas this time he would be acting as a man who had pondered—a wise man—the only wise man! And as his eyes wandered over those around him, it amused him to think of their insensibility. *They* held fast to life, great God!—those wounded men, those enfeebled creatures, those emaciated “auxiliaries”! And to what a life they clung—the miserable men! He recalled the awful prophecies of Decante. They who should see the after-war time—if ever there was an after-war—ah, the new outbreak of misfortunes, the fierce social convulsions in which the bruised and decimated nations would at last find the death-agony! And these men wanted to live for that!

The nun appeared again, with the leaving-card: “No ill-will, eh, bad boy! You must come and see us again!”

He thanked her for her kindly care, and made the round of the ward, shaking hands. Christian's farewell was brief. Was it worth while to wish each other anything?

He got into a tram for St. Pol, and there, with his elbow on the window ledge, he wondered tranquilly—when? And how?

It was a satisfaction to him to notice how, unperceived, that matter also had decided itself

in his mind. This evening, tonight, would be the best. And for the method—the canal? No; he was a good swimmer, and would struggle. Throw himself under a tram or a train? An unclean death! A rifle-bullet in the head? Too many chances of missing!

But he could quite clearly see himself leaning out of a high window—the school had three storeys—and then—dropping to the paved yard below. A matter of a second! Very good—he need not hark back to that subject.

He got out at the Mardyck Gate. The whim took him to make a detour by the dunes before going in. He almost regretted—though what did it really matter?—that for this last stroll, there was a pale and sunless sky.

Sergeant Gandolphe was bringing Dauphin who had had a fainting fit, away from the Port, and Jean could see no way of avoiding him.

“You don’t look very merry!”

“Oh, yes! I’m merry enough!”

“Tomorrow, you know, you need not join the fatigue party——”

“On what ground?”

“Because; as you’re coming out of hospital, you’ll have to go to inspection.”

Jean thought to himself: “Tomorrow? If you knew that tomorrow——!”

“Are you going back to St. Pol now?” Gandolphe asked.

“Not immediately.”

The other seemed to hesitate: "Because I wanted—to ask your opinion——"

"On what?"

"I was thinking of going to Malo—your cousins—they've been so kind. I'm free tomorrow. So won't you—for my first—formal call——"

He was speaking with difficulty: "Couldn't you—go with me?"

"Go with you? Well,——"

With dull eyes Jean was looking into himself, and a voice cried to him, "Too late!"

"It's very annoying," he said, "but——"

The sergeant had blushed. His eyes were fixed on Darboise in fervent enquiry, as on Sylvaine the other day, and Jean was struck by the offer of friendship.

"I proposed tomorrow," Gandolphe went on, "because afterwards—afterwards—before we find ourselves with a day off together——"

Suddenly and with greater energy, he said: "Then you haven't anything to prevent you? I can count on you?"

Jean felt himself pierced by the warm and straightforward gaze of the other, and his decision trembled in the balance. This was the only man for a long time who had shown him friendship.

He hesitated. It cost him dearly, infinitely, to delay—if only for twenty-four hours. For since he had fixed the time and conditions of the decisive deed, he had rejoiced to find his mind disembarassed and peaceful, his lot already lightened.

Yet, from the depth of his tormented soul, a sweet-scented mist arose, as from a flower in the ruined garden of his generous illusions. Should he pay homage to this last gleam of kindness that had appeared?

Gandolphe's gaze was dumbly beseeching him. Jean guessed what feelings might be hiding behind that importunateness——

“Well, right you are!” he said. “Meet you at three o'clock tomorrow!”

PART III

BOOK VIII

CHAPTER I

THE DAWNING OF A NEW DAY

STARS were shining in a clear sky, and a breeze was caressing the world. Having imbibed his cup of "juice," Jean emerged from the quarters and turned towards the east, where a luminous streak already heralded the next dawn, and it surprised him to think of it as a dawn that he should not have seen!

The whole of the day before he had spent in a sort of somnambulist unconsciousness. At the d'Estignards at Malo, whither he had gone with Gandolphe, he had lost himself in a silent and distant background which had brought down on him the old lady's affectionate rebuke. In the evening he had not left the school; not that the execution of his fatal design was imminent, but because he was a slave to the decision arrived at outside his own consciousness, which fixed the liberating act at the striking of four o'clock in the early morning.

Darboise was sitting in meditation on his bed in the barrack dormitory when, a few minutes

after the evening tattoo, Gandolphe arrived like a thunderclap:

“Hey, Darboise! I’m taking you tomorrow!”

“Where’s that?”

“Firing-ground — new fatigue — they’ve just given me instructions.”

A battalion of Zouaves had arrived at St. Pol in the afternoon, come for practice in the machine-gun and the 37mm. The depot had to be responsible for guarding the firing-ground.

“We start at a quarter to four,” Gandolphe went on; “hurry up and go to sleep!”

Certainly it rested only with Jean to advance the deadly moment. But superstition disposed him to respect the adopted decision in detail.

What a night! Jean was forced to undress and get into bed to avoid the suspicious banter of his neighbours. Stretched on the hard mattress, he remained for a long time open-eyed, reviewing the life whose curve had begun fatally to decline a few months before.

He ended by losing consciousness. Waking up, he looked furtively at his watch—ten minutes to four! It was still dark. Getting up quietly and carefully, he dressed himself in a few minutes, went tiptoe out into the corridor and mounted the stairs in complete resolution. He had marked down overnight the third-floor window from which he would cast himself.

A voice hailed him: “Hey, Darboise!”

Some one was running up behind, and overtook

him. It was Gandolphe—always he!—who tapped his shoulder: “Bravo, my boy—in time!”

“I was going to the Bureau——”

“Shut! Better come and waken Buscail.”

The sergeant did not leave him again. They went and knocked on the door of the mess-corporal, who kept them a moment. Going down again, they came on Pincivy, already in uniform. The slender Poitou, beardless as a girl, was laughing in solitude as he lathered himself vigorously under the pump. The others were getting ready. There was no help for it—the chance was gone.

The sergeant ran his eye over the men mustered on the pavement: “All nine here—my picked company?”

Eight for sentry duty, plus the bugler—Pouillot, of the lively face. A careful choice, obviously. All were young men with the exception of Papa Pincivy, an old R. A. T.¹ with a grey beard, a first class soldier chosen by Gandolphe to be his second. There were also Yvonnet, Poitou, big Brossard (a fine fellow), Couvret of the comical ugliness, Mortas, and fearless Dubar. Jean's only surprise was to see Gautier Charles as well, looking more dissolute than ever, and almost a foreigner in this company.

“En route!” They crossed the town, still sleeping in the early day. Just when the leaders were entering the Avenue de la Mer, “Take that way” said Gandolphe, and they turned

¹ Réserviste de l'Armée Territoriale.—TR.

into a foot-path that wound its way between two banks.

The sun had just risen, and was shining right in the line of their march, level with that green plain where nothing caught the eye. It rose quickly, and they laughed as their gigantic shadows were thrown across the barefaced stubble-fields.

The translucent air seemed to bathe one in throbbing buoyancy. Against his expectation, Jean had no difficulty in keeping up the rapid pace. He watched his companions. They were all men of the country by origin, down to Dubar the miner, but for long quartered among the thankless tasks of towns; and it amused him to see how uplifted they were to find themselves again in touch with Mother Earth. They scampered like children to climb the hillocks which bordered the path. Blanchard was picking up pebbles and making wonderful shots with them. Facetiously, Mortas brought him a lump of earth, and all laughed at him when it collapsed in his fingers. They both jumped over a ditch and chased each other like young goats.

As they neared a big farm, they passed by an enclosure of cattle. The bright-coated beasts got up as the little company went by, or turned upon them those eyes where infinity dreams. Our experts criticised the shoulders and necks appreciatively. A young calf trotted up to the fence and uttered a weak bellow: "Hey, Mortas!

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Listen to your cousin, saying good-morning to you!" said Brossard.

They went on into a plain where squares of beet alternated with harvested fields. Stacks, long distances apart, made a great display. A fresh sweet smell was spreading abroad out of the repose of the vanished night. They met groups of women, haymaking: "Hard at work already, ladies?" They had sunburnt faces, shaded by handkerchiefs; one or two were pretty, with shining eyes, and the rest were old women, wrinkled like pippins; they all smiled at the soldiers.

"Fine day, eh?" said the sergeant, coming up to Jean, "almost one of your Southern days!"

Jean looked up, as if anxious to find the least speck of cloud. The full light of summer blazed over the splendid sky.

"Almost," he had to admit.

They went round a field of corn, not yet laid low, and the leaders automatically picked ears and put the grains to their lips. Jean gathered a poppy, and was tempted to decorate his cap with the scarlet, wanton petals.

At last Gandolphe halted them opposite a little house: "I know the good woman."

He went in and talked for a minute. The bargain was concluded, and the tavern-keeper came out: "What? As if I want any of you, my lad!"

She undertook the "mess," and they handed over the meat and potatoes—all they had brought with them.

"What time will the little feed be ready?" They agreed to meet there again, towards noon.

Pincivy, with two assistants, was detached for the huts, whence they brought back the little flags. The bugler went away to Post 4, from which he would blow the calls. Gandolphe, having placed sentries 1 and 2, allotted Jean to Post 3, the nearest one to the point of re-assembly.

"Are you tired, Darboise?" he asked.

"No, sergeant?"

"Will you come with me while I place the others?"

"Willingly."

The posts were arranged along the shore, and the spaces between the last reached almost a kilometre. Darboise regretted having undertaken such a distance. In vain the sergeant thought to interest him by pointing out the earthworks, bastions, and redoubts that they passed, and the enormous pot-bellied guns that looked like alligators.

Returned to his flag, Jean only signified a desire to sit down.

"That's it," said Gandolphe, "but let's find a spot where there's a view."

CHAPTER II

THE LEAVEN OF STRENGTH

THEY went fifty strides away to a spot where a slight rise attracted them, where a few whins had grown, and tufted teasels.

"Here, look; don't you think this will do?" They let themselves sink to the ground.

"A cigarette?"

Jean accepted the invitation, and for some minutes he enjoyed the sensation of rest.

When he had been silent awhile, the sergeant said: "The sea and the sky, I say!"

The remark did not seem at all intended to draw a reply. Gandolphe's eyes were wandering over the vast prospect.

The sea and the sky, indeed! For one's attention in no way halted on the golden shore, but went on and on into infinity.

The sea! The tide was flowing. A hundred feet away from them, the splashing wavelets were sporting with the little flotsam of an ill-fated cargo—apples in thousands, the end of whose caperings was lost in distance. Out at sea, the vast expanse had chequered itself with three paths

of vivid green, and the farthest of them melted insensibly into a golden and transparent horizon.

The sky! Already it was no longer the unsullied vault of just now. It had suddenly enamelled itself with myriads of light mists, all lighted on the same border—a sowing, one might say, of mother-of-pearl shells. The view changed its aspect again. Moving more quickly, the little clouds reminded one of a display of glistening fishes; and then, once more distended in a hidden unfurling, they resembled the silvern undulations of the sand when the wave has ebbed.

Darboise looked to the right, in the direction of Dunkerque, and there a whitish fog had gathered. But the sun was flaming now and drawing in the flaky softness, so that the upper layers disappeared rapidly. Soon there rose out of it the pale sharp outline of the lighthouse, straight as an obelisk. Then, under the effect of some breath of wind, the misty curtain tore itself suddenly apart, and noble apparitions appeared which Jean could not at first identify. Ah, the Hotel de Ville and the Tower! Their emerging roofs and summits had no contact with the ground, so that they appeared like legendary monuments, like palaces in fairy-tales.

Jean was breathing deeply. Just then, Gandolphe leaned towards him, and seemed to offer him the huge panorama in an inclusive gesture. Gently, he completed his idea: "Isn't that some consolation for everything?"

The bugler blew his preliminary warning.

"The firing's going to begin," said the sergeant.
"To our posts!"

They regained the place assigned to Jean: "Don't forget your instructions!" These were very simple—he must forbid approach to the dangerous zone as long as the firing lasted.

Gandolphe went away on his rounds. Darboise remained standing by his flag, with his back turned to the shore now. His eyes wandered over the plain, where, a few kilometres away, the houses of Mardyck scattered their chaplet of shining panes.

He was roused from his reverie by a hardly perceptible booming noise. That was not the guns on the Yser? Or those on the Somme? He had heard it said that the sonorous sound-waves reached fifty leagues on certain days. The Somme, Bouchavesnes, Barleux! How many men were being struck down at that moment? It needed no more to lead him back again into gloomy thoughts.

The sergeant reappeared, and sat down beside him: "That animal of a Gautier!" he said; "he'd gone peacefully to sleep. I've just shaken him well, and I've promised him something if he offends again."

"A funny chap," said Jean, carelessly; "not very interesting, I should say!"

"You see, I'd got the impression that one might be able to do something with him."

Jean's look was still sceptical.

"Yes," said Gandolphe; "I've got some information about him. He's been wounded, and he's made bad acquaintances. I think he's merely a man discouraged."

"Yes, like so many others," Jean murmured.

"Like too many others!"

Darboise coughed: "How can they not be—with what one sees and puts up with! Why,——"

A puff of wind brought them distinctly the growling of the guns two hundred kilometres away.

"As often as one hears *that* noise——!"

As his companion was satisfied to nod his head, "Sergeant," he went on, "answer me. Don't we live in abominable times?"

"Abominable!" the other suddenly affirmed, with a deep violence that made Jean himself start.

Gandolphe seized him by the wrist: "When I watch you, you and others—when I think of all you suffer, physically and morally, through our fault, the fault of us your elders who have brought you there—if you knew my state of mind and the remorse that overwhelms me in the sight of you all, my brothers in peril——"

"In peril?"

"Yes. Some, that of the machine-gun. Others, of whom you're one, the peril of surrendering yourselves, of ceasing to believe—in the Good, in life, in yourselves! What a convulsion is passing through humanity!"

The sergeant changed his tone: "And our duty, as I see it, should be to try to restore to you a little of—your belief, your trust, to give you back the reasons why you should not give way under the burden. For there *are* reasons!"

"What are they?"

Darboise looked at him with a thrilled and feverish look, with something of hope filling him, yet already regretting a hope that must be disappointed.

"You will be astonished," said Gandolphe; "it can't be helped. There is one essential thing that we must make you understand;—you are one of the lucky ones!"

Jean was astounded. He cried: "Lucky? I?"

"Yes,—lucky, fortunate!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this. Look from one end to the other of Europe. Where are the young men of your generation now? Six out of ten are rotting in the ground, with the dreams they fashioned. Of the rest, eighteen out of twenty, perhaps, are in the struggle. They have no right to make a promise, a wish, a plan, nor even to count on lasting till the morrow. A life made up of more privations than the anchorites knew, of more suffering than the slaves of any age endured, the almost certain prospect of perhaps imminent death, either sudden (struck down, blown to bits, or suffocated), or preceded by agony to which none of the ancient tortures could be compared—that is their lot!

Or perhaps to get out of it at the cost of horrible mutilations, deprived of one of the four limbs they were using but lately, or of one of their senses—sight or speech, or of the power to beget!"

"Well, I've got my share!" said Jean, raising his crippled arm.

"Would you not have given all of it?"

Darboise indeed remembered his boyish vow, and what sacrifice he would have consented to, to be sure of returning. But the man who was talking to him—safe and sound, and he had risked nothing! The sergeant read in his face a sort of derision:

"I? Yet, if I could have your wound——"

"You know—where they're got!"

"I've not been there," said Gandolphe, without rebellion against the sarcasm; "but is it a permanent state? I may be going—a month hence. Well, if that does happen, I declare without false shame that I shall do nothing to get out of it, but I shall go trembling, and I shall envy with all my heart, as I envy them today, those who have not stayed there."

He took off his eyeglasses and his fine eyes blinked in the sunshine: "Life! Does one value it? If it were only the free play of one's limbs! And then,—light, music, sweet scents, and the intelligence which rules the world. On a fine morning like this, to be a young man like you, assured of his future——"

"Alas!" said Jean.

But in spite of himself, his nostrils dilated. He felt the strong briny savour on his lips, he felt the warm air sensuously filling his lungs. The light on the sea was transformed. The three green bars of a moment ago had melted into cerulean blue. A phosphorescent nimbus hung over the whole expanse. And then, from the depths of his distress Jean felt that some leaven of strength was beginning to work again within him.

CHAPTER III

MILITARISM

BUT the disease to which he had fallen a victim was too real. The young man stumbled again upon bitterness when he thought of the hateful régime. His companion had evidently suffered less under it. An N. C. O., anyway! Did he mean to defend it? To his surprise the other declared: "I know—all your rebellious feelings are justified; all your indignation, it is shared by me."

"Seriously?" Darboise could hardly believe his ears.

"Oh, militarism!" said Gandolphe.

"What do you think of it?"

"The enemy of all times."

"Quite recently, I thought, on the contrary!"

"No! Force against Intelligence! It may have borne other names. It was the tyranny of kings; the 'will and pleasure,' 'under Royal warrant.' In certain eras, it was religious despotism. The Grand Inquisitors, now, *they* were militarists. When Voltaire uttered his famous cry, 'Down with Superstition!' he spoke in the name of Reason against a humiliating subjection. To-

day, for many reasons, the danger comes less from the Church. But one can repeat the cry now that another Superstition imperils all our victories, all of our Civilisation."

The sergeant made a gesture of enthusiasm: "To think—to think that for centuries there have been men, and Frenchmen among them, Frenchmen especially, who have striven for the liberation of conscience, for the raising of human dignity! Think what was done in 1789, two Revolutions ago; and that after forty-five years of the Republic, in the dawn of that twentieth century in which Man should have sprung into life and vigour, we are finding our way back there again!"

"Then—you're like me?" said Jean, whom this language astonished.

"One has only to think of it for a second. What is the military régime, if it is not the simplest and roughest form of absolutism? It is a mechanism created for imposing force, and force is everything to it. That is enough to show that the mind is its adversary—they are principles in eternal conflict! What is the corner-stone of the armies? Discipline. Now, when you speak of discipline, you speak of the negation of argument. The subordinate can only bow to the decision of his chief, were the latter tenfold wrong. You see the risk. What a prize to offer to the dangerous instincts of man! Think of the unlimited power of the superior over his subordinates, of

the formidable penalties put at his disposition. He is a superior who need not have any sort of superiority. One tab more and it is done—the law of iron; and himself subject to the same absolutism. What intoxication for mediocre brains! What a superior type of man he would need be to resist it! And hence these usual results—arrogance, indolence, dread of responsibility, hatred of ability, a cynical don't-care-ism,—do I paint the picture too black?"

In vain, Gandolphe went on, he sought in militarism a fount of talent which might elsewhere have had the chance of better development. To return to the question of discipline, it was no doubt a primary virtue, if only it did not exclude the right to reason. Even if passive obedience and blind submission to the will of the Higher Command were possibly necessary to the infernal work of war, they bore a singular resemblance to the attributes of slaves.

"Look at the 'attention' order," he went on; "heels together, arms close to the body, head erect—did not one feel that the man was enslaved, unable to reason and even to defend himself? Every time I have stood at attention—very badly—or even when I see it done, how heartily I long for the day when no one will think fit to inflict such humiliation on another!"

Jean nodded his head. The sergeant emphasised the folly that blows unceasingly, like an irresistible fate, across the military world,—folly

elevated into dogma. One had only to note the formulas in which all the philosophy of the soldier had expressed it: "One mustn't try to understand"; "I've reported and I don't care a damn now." "It's according to regulations."

"One laughs about it, but it's more of a crying matter!"

"And the injustices!" said Darboise, in a hollow voice.

"Injustices—they're inevitable! You and I, both of us, have had to bewail them. And we are not the only ones; there are thousands, millions of our brothers. Think, Darboise, of what is going on every hour over all the length and breadth of the country, the unheard-of crimes being committed against justice and humanity. What you have seen here is mild. Everywhere one sees the same consequence of personal, religious, and electoral jealousy and spite, the effects of the mere crotchets of the big bugs, the daily total of exceeded rights, vexations, and scandals, whether yonder in the trenches or at the rear, the depots, the hospitals, the factories! Some of the newspapers, under such headings as 'Facts which Talk'! 'May One Say?' 'Is it True That—?' hint at some things, but the Censor wipes out the details. Why, if the facts are accurate? I don't know if you're like me, but every time I read such lines, a frenzy seizes me, and I could shout out. A single proved instance of injustice, persisted and gloried in, drives me mad! One imbecility! In our time!

And I ask myself again 'My poor country, what are you coming to?'"

This indictment revived Darboise's personal grievances in greater bitterness; and he said:

"You see what good reason there is for—chucking up the sponge!"

"No!" said Gandolphe.

"After such a relapse?"

"And if it was necessary, before the final advance?"

"What do you mean?"

"Militarism is a plague, a social scourge. But suppose that which we bewail were only a reflection of what rages elsewhere, or only a rejoinder to it—a rejoinder designed to administer a fatal blow to the other?"

In broad lines Gandolphe sketched a vast political thesis. In France (as in England) the spirit of military imperialism held in check in spite of all by the democratic spirit. No recruiting across the Channel, and hardly an army. In France, the period of compulsory "service" regarded as an out-of-date "fatigue," and war looked upon as a monstrosity whose horror made it so improbable that one did not make ready for it. In France, the cult of brute force, of discipline, of conquest, and even of revenge,¹ was left to a small number of sectarians or isolated dreamers. Moreover, the fomenters of such doctrines remained

¹ In France, the word "revanche" carried a specific, if ulterior, reference to the 1870 war and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine.—TR.

rather as men of unreality than of calculating realism.

On the other hand there was a country in Europe, a great country, where the infernal war-like ardour glowed in the souls of men. Over there, all alike—the commercial world, the philosophers, and the people—were in accord with the Junkers; and all looked upon expansion by the sword as the speedy way to impose their triumphant hegemony. And the frightful machine arose by their unanimous consent.

It was impossible to clear them from that fundamental responsibility. Militarism, Imperialism found their chosen homes in the central empires. All their ways of life were infected. There, the period of military service was an honour sought after by the humblest citizen. Even their "attention" was stiffer and more humiliating than ours, the salute more obsequious; and as for the parade goose-step—! To all this must be added the haughtiness of the officers' caste, the corporal punishments, the kicks, and the sword-blade blows. Such was the spirit of the army in which the nation delighted.

More still; one saw the nation contaminated in its turn by the same virus. Hence such abominable vagaries as that a High Court judge and an old lady saw nothing unusual in their yielding their right of way on the sidewalk to a beardless subaltern. From top to bottom of society there was the same deferential worship for vested

positions,—grovel before the brass-hat!—the same snobbish hypocrisy, the same basis of cruelty, vulgarity, and materialism. Such was Germany at the moment when she decided to make use of her “Kolossal” preparations. Such was the religion she offered the world, along with her coarse cleanness and her gift of organisation; and such a present did not make up for the other! And one should realise that when France stood upright again upon the Marne, that was the sublimity of Mind barring the way to the invading armies of Matter. In those days, the Ideal escaped from the gravest danger that had threatened it since Marathon, since Cannes, since the Catalaunian Fields.¹ To the men who shared in that victory is the promise of eternal glory!

“But since then,” said Jean, thrilled; “if our nation has become in its turn gangrened by militarism?”

“No,” the sergeant declared; “I put my trust in the instinct of the race. Only think that just now, in the midst of war, we are recruiting new converts.” How many good people there used to be who lived outside the military yoke and were inclined to admit that it was in a measure tolerable! What an awakening for them, now that they have experienced its rigours! In the hearts of all oppressed people, of all to whom the sus-

¹ From the Latin “Campi Catalaunici,” now Châlons-sur-Marne, where in A. D. 451, the Romans defeated Attila the Hun, the “Scourge of God.”—TR.

tenance of Justice and Reason is refused, the adoration of those gods takes root. And they who have fought will return with consecrated affections and holy hatreds. The oppressors will not hold fast; their eyes will open likewise. When the German might comes to stagger, when their militarism collapses, the qualities which they threatened will be mightily let loose throughout the world. Our own militarism will be cleaned away, too. And when the monstrous beast is killed, then we shall be able to hold out hopes that this war was the last.

“Perhaps!” said Darboise.

But he remained subdued. The thought of the “last war” was good enough to soothe his soul; and it was much to him to know that millions of men were sharing his rebellion. And yet, in the all-pervading silence, they suddenly started at a crackling noise quite near them. The Zouaves were beginning to fire; and Darboise recalled, in spite of himself, the recent circumstances when just such another rattle from the instrument of death sounded in his ears. Once more the world seemed to drape itself in the hue of mourning,—Claude Boucheron, Augèures! In a choked voice, he said:

“I could forgive everything—I could be patient—but these heaps of dead—my friends who have all fallen, my master, my brother—I am left alone. Can you say, when I think of that——”

Gandolphe sighed: “Yes, indeed; that is what’s irreparable!”

"So then, even your wisdom proves useless, you see."

"For what?"

"To give me any real reasons——"

"Reasons for doing what?"

As Jean was silent, the other went on: "Come now; we're agreed, eh, that the essential matter of regret is death?"

"Yes."

"What's overpowering you is the ravages of death around you?"

"Principally that, yes."

"Then, tell me. Were you quite—logical?"

"In—what?"

The sergeant looked at him: "My lad—in wanting to kill yourself?"

A blush rose to Jean's forehead: "What did you know about it?"

"This morning, eh? You'd decided on this morning?"

"And when did you——?"

"Ah, you did give me a night of it!"

"How? Where?"

"At the end of the corridor, with my eyes on the knob of your door."

Jean was touched. He remembered their curious encounter in the early morning: "You had that pluck?"

"It was worth while."

"Hum!"

"A life!"

“Even when it makes such a botch of things?”

Darboise pretended to be still morosely perplexed. But his desire to die seemed to have evaporated in the warmth of the breeze.

The sergeant got up: “I must go and glance at my chaps!”

Just as he was going away, he turned towards his companion and said, with a friendly smile:

“Tell me, then, that—it’s done with, eh?”

“What’s done with?”

“Your—bad notions?”

Said Jean, chaffingly: “Who knows? When it’s dark, and I find myself alone again——”

“Just think, that when it’s dark, the sun is making his way towards us——” With imperious gentleness Gandolphe repeated: “Swear to me—that you’ll give up that folly.”

Darboise felt the high-minded ascendancy over him: “I owe so much to you, sergeant.”

CHAPTER IV

THE SPARK WITHIN THE SOUL

THE day ended as in a dream. After his long journey in the open air, the night found Darboise in the unbroken slumber of a child; and in the growing dawn, he set off again.

As all the battalions of the sector were taking turns at the firing practice, this state of affairs would be prolonged into weeks;—rising before the sun, the walk in the fresh morning, the peaceful sentry-go under the bountiful sky of August and then of September, the ten o'clock respite, when our sentries repaired to the little tavern for breakfast, with a devil of an appetite!

All nine of them—ten, with Gandolphe—lived by themselves, and hardly came into contact with the company. The sergeant had read them a sermon,—they were good boys, selected by him with great care; and the least they could do was to get on with each other like good comrades!

And, in fact, they were soon inspired by a felicitous “*esprit de corps*.” Only Gautier Charles kept himself rather aloof for a time. Before he would join in the games of cross-cat and leap-frog

organised in the moments of rest, he required nothing less than the leading example of Gandolphe. He was put out of humour, too, in the course of the first fortnight, by two or three lively spirits who brought the sergeant's rebuke on themselves.

Gandolphe took care that his sentries' duties were observed, that the bugler bugled, and that his men were in their places at the exact minute. He took his bicycle with him, and once or twice a day each sentry saw him appear just when he was least expected.

Adventure and difficulties cropped up, such as on that morning when a party of the Engineers sought to dig trenches in the middle of the forbidden zone. Gandolphe stuck to his guns and won the day against an adjutant who got angry and discourteous.

And it was the same one afternoon when, as they came away from lunch, they found quite an imposing array of English troops on the beach. The Tommies had undressed and were ready to bathe. Now this was the moment when the firing should begin. Gandolphe made representations in English.

"Oh! Dangerous, yes!" conceded a spruce lieutenant.

Pincivy's advice was: "Can't be helped! It's their funeral! Let 'em alone!"

But the sergeant preferred to send by urgent messenger a warning which caused the firing to be

held up. The officer in charge lost his temper and made a report to headquarters, and there was quite a comedy. Three times within a week Gandolphe was sent for to Dunkerque to give evidence.

"Well, Sergeant? Plenty of bother!" said Pincivy to him.

"Yes, old chap; but it would have been a worse misfortune if some one had got killed."

On the other hand, as he smilingly admitted, the example of these English had given him an idea,—to-morrow they would bring bathing-drawers!

And so it was. Jean suspected that he had himself bought some for the three most impecunious ones. In the days of heat which followed, the last of the summer, they had the delight of offering their nakedness to the sea air, the sunshine, the briny waves, of chasing each other along the sands.

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Thus did Gandolphe succeed in maintaining good feeling and good temper in his little company—a worthy work. And he had taken on another. Between his rounds he never failed to come and rejoin Jean. They strolled up and down together to the tune of interminable chat.

Darboise had always had a liking for general theorising; and among the most valued hours of his youth he reckoned the time spent in exchanging

paradoxes with Auguères, Boussac, Chinard, and others; or the evenings at Claude Boucheron's, when the master and his fellows poured out their dazzling fancies.

Sometimes Jean had regretted the absence in himself of a really cultivated philosophy, and this led him at first, in a certain timidity, to avoid the risk of a face-to-face conflict of ideas with the man who had shown himself the other day, in the breadth of the matters he had discussed, an expert in dialectics. But his companion put such kindly good-nature into it, and sought to give him pretexts for co-ordinating his thoughts, that gradually Jean recovered his former self-confidence, his passion and his ability for connected argument.

What subjects did they not touch upon in the course of those translucent mornings or broiling afternoons! At first it was the essential problem of good and evil. Jean had identified in the sergeant the existence of a faith, a generous enthusiasm; and on that he attacked him:

"You see only the good!"

"Wherever there is any!"

"That is to say?"

"Wherever there is life! Good is the note of the universe."

Darboise sighed: "I used to believe it. No one —no one was more of an optimist than I."

He remembered the fervent outlook upon life of his twenty years, his arguments on the subject

with Andrée—ah, Andrée! He saw good fellows everywhere, his masters and his fellow-disciples, all those friends that he could count upon—and Chinard in the front rank! He was uninterested in politics. In his eyes, society rested on rational bases, and the part of the artist in it was beautiful. The governing world, to which he was a stranger, inspired him not so much with mistrust as with a sort of ingenuous deference. How could one not believe in men whose panegyrics he read every morning in the newspaper? Ah, his disenchantment since then! Not only in the matter of the governing class, whom he could never forgive for having made possible and probable the monstrous conflict of today; but in man himself! That was what he had learned in the school of war! He had torn the bandage from his eyes and had seen through the barbarous and brutally malignant elements in sorrowful humanity!

“Here now, for instance, and apart from yourself, who’s the ‘right sort’?”

“Oh! Apart from *me!*”

“Apart from you, yes; I wouldn’t give a —— you know!—for all I’ve met!”

“Come now! If it were only—your cousins——”

“I’m talking about soldiers!” Jean passed in review those round about him, judged and condemned them all in a word: the troopers—a grotesque and bestial race; Decante and Cazenave—slippery people! As for the heads! The captain, a lunatic; the lieutenant, a sly evil-doer;

the adjutant, an insipid fop. In other places, it was worse. What of the Port? Brigadier Néraudin, with the soul of a slave-driver, the absurd Deludat—Moulin, Dubus, and all the lot! Specimens like those made one fall out with humanity!

The sergeant stopped him: "But you're playing an easy game, you know."

"How's that?"

"In effect, you can see only mobilised men, and among them some non-coms. and officers to whom, as we have agreed, all virtues are difficult. It's the *system* that I abhor; I forgive the men; I still admire the gleams of reason and justice that their divine essence permits to shine from under that obliterating exterior."

"Don't you find that difficult?" murmured Jean, ironically.

"I'm not joking. When I find, in a being as bad as you imagine him to be, an action or word or thought which reveals a trace of gentleness or goodness, then I feel there is trembling within him that essence of his generous nature which the circumstances in the midst of which he has developed, harrowing as they may be, have failed to alter entirely. There is hope for him. And in making the experiment, only rarely does that blessed presence fail to appear."

"Hum! Take the men of the detachment——"

"Monade, now! You dislike him? Yet I've seen him stand up for you at the risk of exasperating the lieutenant. Papa Meunier? An old pre-

tentious imbecile, I grant you. Do you know that he's taken charge, in Paris, of two grand-nieces, his brother's son having been killed?"

"Really? I didn't know," said Jean.

"Fauvel? No one more than I has reason to complain of him. I believe him—" He touched his forehead.

"Touched?" Darboise asked.

"Yes. But how can one help pitying him?—a fragment of shell in his back—injury to the spine."

Gandolphe went on: "As for the others, whether it's the brigadier, Deludat, or all the gang of convict-warders at the Textile, do we know enough about them? We see their cruel faces, which can be excused perhaps; and have they not perhaps another aspect—human, sublime—why not? Don't despair of any one. Events sometimes improve them. Moulin, you know, adjutant at the Office of Staff, one of those whose cold severity has been most unbearable to me—well, in the last fortnight, he's transformed. Thanks to him, a chap's just got court-martialled, and the charge being grave, he got ten years' imprisonment—ten years—a shattered life. Just after, he hears of the death of his only son at Bouchavesnes, and he's badly knocked; bowled over with remorse, and now all the time on the track of injustices to put right. Quite paternal towards the poor world—converted. I'm always on the look-out for the conversion of those people."

"For that of Dubus?"

Gandolphe laughed frankly: "Ah, for once, no! I know *him* too well. I've never heard a single good deed put to his credit. I grant you Dubus!"

He stopped chaffing and went on: "But what's one Dubus in the multitude? The exception proves the rule. Let's look round again. Even here, aren't there any men who deserve well of you?"

As Jean was raising his eyes, Gandolphe said: "Alquier, head surgeon at the hospital?"

"Very nice to me, that's true!"

"And Lavigne?"

Jean thought of the number of his companions for whom the good fellow had "wangled" the granting and stamping of railway-permits and leave-papers, for the secret coming of their wives! He twisted the regulations, but only where the latter were inhuman. His was the calling of a St. Bernard dog—without the least personal advantage! And this was all for pals—and often for passers-by—whom he would never see again. Did one have to search for human kindness there?

At this point Darboise could not restrain a little sarcastic laugh: "All the same—poor old Lavigne,—he boozes!"

"He boozes? Because he's unhappy and lonely. Instead of making game of him, oughtn't we to cure him?"

"You try it on!"

"Exactly. We're having lunch together on Sunday. I'm going to try to become friends with him."

Gandolphe went on: "And the foundation of the crowd, the people, let's return to the common people! It's on them that we've got to build." He was alluding to the peasant, whose so many lowly virtues transfigure him in warfare: "You know him better than I do."

Jean thought of Daumalin, his comrade-in-arms at Nanteuil and Champien. They kept watch one night together at the entry to Quesnoyen-Santerre. His was a choice soul under a rustic exterior, with his Beauce dialect; one of those whose memory remained graven on Jean's heart.

The sergeant cited their companions:

"Mortas, Poitou, Brochard, and the others! Natures of surprising affection and sensitiveness. I ask you, Darboise—if we were taking those boys up to the firing line, wouldn't they make a famous squad?"

"They would follow you anywhere!"

Gandolphe repeated: "Anywhere. What a result to get without much trouble! Attachment and devotion, unselfishness—all natural flowers! Ah, is man really bad?"

No; he rose against the doctrine, either written or thought, which took pleasure in dragging the basest side of the species into the light, and reduced man to the proportions of a "wanton and ferocious gorilla," as a great writer had said. That man

was an egotist was the great grievance, and that was tantamount to saying—what? That his guiding principle was the desire to preserve himself and be happy—in a word, the appetite for life. So, if life was a good thing, then the appetite for it was legitimate and sacred also! By all means, check the errors into which he may be led, but has one any right to make no allowances for him? Why try to compel nature? Certainly religions and moralities went too far (and the Catholic religion was the foremost in the matter) in requiring that man should begin by sacrificing his instincts on their altar. Only some too peculiar minds agree to it, while the multitude is reduced to wringing its hands before virtue the inaccessible. Besides, would one dare to preach that the rational delights of egotism should be renounced, the enjoyments offered to this creature of a day be taken away? Might one not permit man his rush into all sorts of pleasure, and even teach him respect for voluptuous delights, a consecrated fruit which is also of God?

Gandolphe dreamed of a moral philosophy which should consist in seeking all good things that life has to offer, that He may be magnified and it enjoyed; a school of human development and not of suffocation. Ah, seek to cultivate that noble groundwork of man which one finds—the sergeant declared it with passionate fervour—in the vilest of men, the most disinherited; seek to help him carry home the wealth of his harvest!

“Goodness, charity, compassion, the forgiving of wrongs——”

“All—Christian virtues!” remarked Jean.

“Quite so! Isn’t Christianity one of the finest moral authorities that humanity has raised? I accuse it only of some harshness and narrowness. Let it be useful to us, if it is no longer sufficient for us.”

Gandolphe then invoked examples, and reduced to a few formulas that lofty and sociable morality whose advent he so desired; intellectual axioms as well as precepts for the conscience: “Be sincere to yourself,” “Don’t be satisfied with words,” “Get at people’s hearts,” “Better a little evil for me than a big one for some one else.”

Emphasising that last rule, he suddenly revealed the application and bearing of it. To despoil the leisured classes by a stroke of the pen of those comforts which they considered necessary and legitimate would be impossible without violence and even without injustice. But they might be entreated, without yielding their conquests, to make a step, several steps, as many steps as possible, towards the labouring and suffering class, to grant it a little of its money, its time, its interests.

“A little of its heart above all! It would be so valuable and it is so rare! The good employer like the good officer, he who has laid arrogance aside and cast out the abominable spirit of tyranny,

what a step *he* makes towards the social solution! Oh, for the day when all will have recourse to it!"

He was speaking truly, and Jean knew it. Hatred against officers—officer and employer are one and the same thing—is never or hardly ever due to the tasks which they require; it is aroused merely by those whose gruff voices and scornful looks insult human dignity. In other respects—the good is deep-rooted! The sergeant quoted the instance of the captain formerly commanding his platoon of "exempts." Ah, he didn't use them sparingly—rarely was there an hour of relaxation. But, on returning from some exhausting manœuvre, when he said, "My lads, I'm satisfied with you; there will be leave granted," all troubles were forgotten, and a burst of gratitude went out to him. Ah, the unlimited devotion to a courteous and just leader who does not treat you like dogs!

Gandolphe became again animated:

"And one goes in quest of happiness! Is not the fact of being 'the right sort,' whether conscientious workman or benevolent master,—is not that the primary satisfaction? What moments like those when you feel that you have just shown yourself kind? It is a pity the attention of youth is hardly drawn to that point! One always talks to our children of Reason—very good!—and Justice. Always those dry and chilling virtues, when there is the religion of universal kindness! Disregard sarcasms, and disarm them by force of forbearance

and—who forbids you?—intelligence. Come, offer your hand again to him who has offended you, and who regrets it perhaps; do not humiliate the beaten foe. Punish only as a last resource, and remove the punishment as quickly as possible. Honour with an argument the holder of even the most foolish theories. By thus acting, what grudges would be disarmed, what forces would be rekindled—to one's own and to the general advantage! And when one has done a beneficial deed, why not enjoy commendation? But from time to time one may have an uncommon pleasure in leaving some meritorious act in obscurity, and cultivate its memory to oneself, like a beautiful flower. When one grows old, tell me, what recollection of glory or even of love will be sweeter to invoke?"

CHAPTER V

AFTER THE WAR—WHAT?

JEAN found himself pervaded by a feeling of respect. There was something of the apostle in this lowly non-com., this college teacher! He was a type of kindness without weakness, of energy without brutality.

By common consent they had at first set themselves to semi-abstract discussions. But now Jean, driven from one of the strongholds of his pessimism, brought up again the favourite subject by which his trouble was increased—the war! What had become of the Good in an epoch dedicated to horrors? He poured out Christian's and Decante's anathemas renewed. There was no end in sight, and Europe was rolling into the abyss. Shame and woe on the heads of the governments of all the countries!

Gandolphe flatly refused to follow him on to that ground: "A subject laid by."

"Why?"

"Because we are in the struggle."

"Must we go on with it?"

"That is not *our* responsibility," said the

sergeant. "What do we know of the military, diplomatic, and economic conditions under which we are fighting? Some few men only—that is the danger of this formidable centralisation—are so placed that they can know where they are leading our adversaries and ourselves and what exact or approximate meaning should be read into their lofty statements concerning the decisive victory which they have promised us now for two years. Possibly they have made mistakes! One day they will make their reports. One day we shall know whether after the Marne or the Yser a peace might have been concluded which found France great and free, or whether it was necessary to go on with the struggle, if it is still necessary to go on and destroy in the other race that base instinct of invasion and expansion by armed force."

"If the answer is no?" asked Jean.

Gandolphe hesitated. One felt that he had scruples. But collecting himself, he said:

"If they have been mistaken they will pay. But one thing is certain. Whether they go to the Pantheon or the Gemoniæ, it is not we their contemporaries who are qualified to deify or sentence them. We can only bow our heads and submit to the direction of the leaders whom we have chosen. I will say more than that. Even supposing we are convinced that they have gone astray, it would certainly be our duty not to raise at once a clamour of reproach upon them. The time is still too tragical, and the enemy is lying

in wait for our faltering. Don't let us forget both that the battle of Verdun is not yet finished, and that it is still our existence as a nation that is at stake. A year ago, perhaps the question stood differently. It is possible that the verdict of posterity on our statesmen will be severe. There is one thing at least in their favour—the tenacity of their faith in final victory even at the most hopeless moments. And what sort of victory does their faith, perhaps ingenuous, still pursue? I doubt that one can lay imperialist visions at their door. No, it is a French victory, bringing enfranchisement to the world and their liberty to conquered races."

"Our poor old France!" sighed Jean; "what will she be on the morrow of the war?"

"What we make her."

"How many will there be of us?"

"Enough, if we are conscientious in the task that lies heavy upon us."

"What task?"

"To reconstruct."

"Reconstruct? So that, in thirty years, another war——?"

"There must not be war any more."

"Do you believe in disarmament?"

"Just don't I?" cried Gandolphe. "Ask these millions of beings who are suffering and dying if that is not the sole prospect which resigns them to it!"

Darboise sounded him. What clauses would there be in the future treaty of peace?

The other declined to play the prophet. He only expressed his hope that even in the case of decisive victory we should not be unfaithful to our native generosity, that we should not excite the will to revenge in our enemies of today by extravagant requirements.

“I seem to be dreaming when I hear people talk of crushing Germany. Parcel out a country that has afforded a spectacle of cohesion and endurance such as perhaps the world has never seen? To parcel out that country, would it not be a hateful attempt on that famous principle of nationality which the Allies have inscribed on their banner, which comprises our principal right to pose as champions of civilisation? I am of those who count on the preservation of a great Germany. I mean, some will have it that that nation is incorrigibly warlike and athirst for empire. Nonsense! I see her on the contrary having profited by the lesson, having learned in her turn that every claim of a race to supremacy in the world is doomed to a disastrous check. War! As if there could be an instinct of madness among the deep strata of the nations which drives them towards the ravages of machine-guns, the frightfulness of bombardments, the horror of trenches in winter! On the contrary, what a repulsion drives them away from it, in Germany as much as here, householders and shopkeepers, workmen and peasants, who wish only to acquire a little comfort, to enjoy the good things of

life and the smiles of their children! If their rulers were guilty, they will crush them, or else the latter, now enlightened,—why think them bereft of reason?—will not risk another trial of strength—if only we do not push them to the limit!”

Gandolphe was thoughtful for a moment. Then he went on: “How important it is not to preserve the fatal leaven, not to bring up our children in blind abhorrence of other children whose only crime——”

He stopped:

“Perhaps this is not the time to think, in the middle of war, of the innocence into which the sons of our enemies will tomorrow be born. But, peace once signed, what if nothing but hatred could come out of a conflict of such dimensions! What if, on the other hand, when the nations have found in the war an occasion for self-examination, it should unexpectedly prove to be but a stage—and the bloodiest—towards the Universal Republic! Seriously, I ask myself if the nations have not come, in the heart of this atrocious struggle, to appreciate each other more? Take the prisoners, either on our side or on theirs, who fell into the hands of reasonable and humane guards. Take those stories they bring back, about the quiet weeks on the front lines and the poor troopers of both sides who arrange a sort of God’s truce by some well, and exchange tobacco or food—almost a reconciliation in the presence of their misery, which is the same for all! Nothing moves me more than

deeds like that, although they did right to stop the proceedings, as it was likely to weaken the spirit of the fighters."

Once more he interrupted himself:

"Let's put that subject aside, too. But as man to man, may I not confess to you that there are some—Boches, to whom I can pay respect and esteem even just after the struggle? I shall forget the things said in the frenzy of carnage, things which incriminate both sides. I shall forget that Hauptmann was a signatory to the Manifesto, and continue to admire him as the author of *The Weavers*. Beethoven, Schiller, Wagner, Nietzsche—you were always my friends; have you ever ceased to be? You are men, and I believe in man. You bequeathed us beauty. Beauty and goodness are the same thing, and it is through their divinity that men hold communion in you!"

Jean rallied to the beautiful hope that shed its light on the time to come. But were not these ideas, he wondered, a chimera engendered by one generous brain? And one day he questioned Gandolphe on the point:

"Sergeant, are there many men who think like you?"

"Millions."

"Of what party?"

"The Socialist."

"Oh, the Socialist!" Jean repeated, with a trace of scorn.

Gandolphe looked at him: "I see. You read

the leading newspapers. You are taken in by the poison which they unwearyingly distil! This war is the failure of Socialism, I suppose?"

Darboise confessed: "It couldn't prevent it!"

"The enemies of Socialism held the authority."

"Does it really still exist?"

"It is the true religion of today, the true reconstructive force!"

"Is it enough, in your opinion?"

"The basis of it is intangible. But the teaching of Karl Marx is irrefutable in sound reason."

"Is it enough?"

"I don't pretend that it won't have to be widened. I could wish there were more affection and kindness in it, as I was saying. That can be added. It is under that flag that we shall make our own new conquests. No more sectarians—the party is open to all of good-will. We shall appeal to all men who are capable of responding to the sight of human suffering, of surrendering something of their pleasures to relieve that suffering. Liberals, Radicals, Christians,—there is room for all in our ranks."

"Do they not already reproach you with being disunited?"

"In this hell, that is natural when so much vertigo distorts individual vision! But observe that in every religion the efflorescence of sects is an earnest of vitality; and in the end, all these questions of majorities and minorities which divide us today are in no way matters of doctrine, but only

different points of view touching our attitude during the war. When it is over, I believe our differences will be forgotten, I believe there will be an early reunion of the hostile brothers."

"Unified, then?" said Jean, and one could again detect in his tone a sort of mistrust of this other mobilisation. Gandolphe noticed it:

"I, too, should prefer to take orders only from my conscience. But in our days, the individual, though so great a thing, is really so little. I shall cheerfully give up some of my own independence; I shall throw my energies into that current where alone, millions of times multiplied, they will have the chance to work the huge machine in which progress is slowly ground out."

"But are you certain that the ideas which are personal and dear to you, those which you explained to me just now, will be adopted by your party?"

"They are in the air, and we shall do everything to ensure their victory. Discussion is free among us, if action is not always. Our Socialist catechism, a product of Reason, is made up of plastic and living matter; it is not one of those sacrosanct dogmas which no one may touch."

"And your programme of reconstruction, do you say it's ready?"

"In its guiding principles, certainly! We shall experience some fumbling hesitation. The pressure will not be continuous, but slow, and subject to recoils in accordance with man's nature. We may go astray, too; but we're always sure of finding

the road again if the torch which guides us is our sincere attachment to Reason and Kindness."

"To life!"

"Yes—befriend it at all costs, try to make use of all its generous resources, to safeguard it from the thousand attempts of evil forces! The struggle against all those intellectual and physical miseries whose general name is Death——"

"Against War, then, before everything!" Jean murmured, again seized by his obsession.

"Certainly! But War, that sovereign evil, is only the result of evils. Everlasting peace would be the magnificent confirmation of all the other good things with which we want to endow society. Why does War exist? Through the fault of absurd or at least imperfect systems of government, still raging in Europe; for the peoples, held in leash, were very far from controlling their destinies or so much as their deep longings. They were in the hands of blind Utopians or ambitious materialists, who thought only of assuaging their individual thirst! With the nations enlightened and masters of themselves, do you think War would be possible? We must do all to give them that consciousness on which life is conditional. And to begin with, we must wrestle with the death-germs whatever they may be!"

The sergeant enumerated some of them, though too well known, alas!—and, above all, those which corrupt a country's health and then undermine its morality: consumption, syphilis, alcoholism—the three-headed monster!

“Ah, alcoholism!” Jean sighed.

That scourge of the country was spreading mournfully since the war. He quoted the case of Mafranc. There were all the elements of happiness in that home. The wife was a good woman and the man was earning an excellent living; yet hell was in the house! Mafranc had done no work for a fortnight and came home drunk every night, with threats, curses, and blows. He was far gone in consumption and his progeny jeopardised. The four children were sickly and backward; the youngest, a deaf mute from birth.

At that picture, Gandolphe turned pale: “And to think that it’s like that everywhere! Ah, the Socialist teaching—is it not here that it would have to be rigorously applied?”

“What is it?”

“Absolute prohibition of the sale of alcohol in France.”

“But—think of the anger of the trade! And the Members of Parliament——!”

“Quite so—I can forgive their hesitation. It’s very nice to assume a fine attitude. But suppose they were to lose their seats over it, and their successors set up the hateful system again? You see how these problems are connected. The problem of electoral reform might seem secondary; on the contrary, it’s of prime importance. Save the representatives from the tyranny of the publican; enlarge the constituencies; appeal for votes for principles, not for persons, the first time

the ballot came round. And all the worse for the blockheads whom the principles did not interest!"

"What a job, all that!" said Jean.

The sergeant was silent for a moment, as though really confronting it in all its formidable complexity:

"But it will be done, it will be done!"

He indicated in anticipatory detail the work of the great Assembly of the future: fiscal measures first, of bold innovation; then at once the blossoming of laws of public and private health; the encouragement of labour and the return to the land, depopulation thwarted, prostitution fought, the procurers of abortion hunted down, and sports encouraged:

"Health and energy! You will see France splendid again!"

"If there were enough of you——!"

"How many are there who are getting their forces ready in the dark, who will be led without difficulty into good works, and ever more good works! There are some already at it! The municipality of this place is Socialist in mind if not in name. In the middle of all this trouble, their brave beginnings have been shown me. They are going to introduce me to the mayor; an admirable man, they say,—a man of ideals and of accomplishment, and I can see it in his work; one of those who will take the lead and set up again the harmonious Europe of tomorrow!"

CHAPTER VI

A WONDERFUL HOPE

IT seemed great and pure to Jean, this enthusiastic confidence Gandolphe had preserved in Life and the Good at a time when Evil and Death appeared to have extended their tyranny finally over the universe. Sometimes the desire seized him to declare himself in his turn an ardent worker for the great cause—as long as he was one of the survivors! But his conviction really remained abstract and cold, something very far from the magnanimous impetuosity which sweeps away barriers and destroys them! To expend oneself in action—excellent; but a numbness was paralysing him.

But it happened that he began examining himself. Amidst that benumbedness that had overrun his conscience, he found a bruised place. Andrée! The thought of his wife arose and suggested a permanent obstacle to him. Noble as the object might be which was proposed for his endeavours, unlikely as he felt it to be that love would ever return and fill up the void in his soul, he would never again regain that serenity of mind which was essential to action.

The sergeant saw this persistent melancholy clearly enough, but he was too thoughtful to scare him away by an imprudent question, and strove merely to rekindle the living forces that were latent in him. Their talks, one should not forget, did not always rise to philosophical dignity; they often began and were continued in a tone of friendly playfulness; and, like the others, clad only in bathing-drawers, they spent one or two hours a day in races and gleeful struggles on the sands.

Darboise frequently, it is true, pretended weariness in order to get away from the games, the duty of taking care of himself—"with my disease, you know!"

"What disease?"

He confessed to Gandolphe that he thought himself consumptive.

The sergeant took no rest till he had taken him to consult one of his friends at Dunkerque who had been a hospital house-surgeon, and whose verdict was definite: "Certainly there had been—a threat; but there was nothing at all now—no longer anything!"

Indeed Jean was forced to admit that this open-air life, these long walks, these hasty baths—nothing could be better for him. He was putting on weight, the best of all signs. So that anxiety was disappearing. But when he thought of her whose care had already snatched him from death, an expression of distress came to life again beneath his smile.

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They went again together to the d'Estignards. This time, when Sylvaine was asked to sing, Gandolphe boldly offered to accompany her. And from the first bars, the big fingers they had thought so heavy, ran over the keys and drew from them the restrained and exquisite melody of the *Invitation au Voyage*. The beautiful harp-like voice worked wonders when supported by those modulated arpeggios. After Duparc, they had Chausson, Franck, and Fauré. Sylvaine, enchanted, opened the chest that held her music, and brought armfuls of the pieces she had formerly learned, but which had slumbered long, like abandoned beauty.

"Shall we try this one too? What do you say?"

So on Tuesdays and Fridays it became a custom for our friends to hasten their return from the firing-ground and take the road to the town, where these recitals were regularly renewed.

Though music had but lately left Jean almost indifferent, he began to find in it a penetrating and subtle charm. Perhaps it was that the thrilling sensitiveness of the masters of today was taking effect on his less responsive spirit. Certain conversations with Gandolphe opened a new world to him. There was no end to the other's fervent claims on the subject of music: "One of Life's chief blessings!"

The sergeant added: "You, a painter, isn't your art much to you?" And he confessed one day his

own radical incompetence in all matters of plastic expression—a gap which he would have dearly liked to fill up!

That same evening, as they were returning through the fertile country, Jean pointed to the western sky, where a prodigious mass of flaming cloud seemed to be assuming the shape of a halo, and said: "To reproduce that——!"

They chatted, and Jean described that stubborn dream of the painter—that he, transient little worm as he was, should perpetuate if only a moment or a detail of immortal nature, and his own immortality in so doing. He talked to him of his chosen career, of his beginnings, and further back still, of his childhood on the shores of the "Maures,"^{*} bathed in sunshine.

"I should like to see—some of your work," said Gandolphe.

"I haven't anything here."

"Why not start it again?"

The wise advice took effect. After lunch next day, Jean amused himself by sketching a portrait of Mortas in pencil—a striking likeness and a success. The others hastened to demand their portraits; he granted their wish and no one was jealous.

He had confided to the sergeant his liking for landscape, which he had hardly indulged so far. One morning he carried his box of water-colours

^{*} The Mountains of the Moors, on the Mediterranean coast, between Hyères and Fréjus.—TR.

with him, and worked for an hour, seated beside his flag.

It was challenging difficulties to attack that immense subject of the sea and the dunes; but his craft triumphed in the atmosphere with which he flooded the whole coast, in his skilful lowering of the tones. His comrades cried out in admiration, and Gandolphe said, "What you could do, if you liked!"

A little ingenuous pride awoke within him and warmed his heart.

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But still this was not enough. The sergeant well knew that a large part of that heart, exactly the most sorrowful part, was closed to his solicitude.

Where was the real wound? He had guessed it long since. Jean's distress was evident whenever reference was made to his home; and one day when Madame d'Estignard told Gandolphe of the singular conditions under which Andrée had gone away, they had understood each other, deeply affected at the discovery of this mysterious drama.

More than once Darboise, under the gaze of his friend and in a rush of childish willingness, had thought of pouring out his heart. What held him back was a kind of scruple against descending from the serene heights to which their discussions had lifted them, down to that ticklish ground of pitiful humanity, and especially against the em-

barrassment of confessing his fault to this purest of the pure.

If only Gandolphe would make the first step!
That is just what happened.

One afternoon, the sergeant led their conversation on to the partner whom he had loved and lost. Jeanne was her name. Betrothed from youth, they had married at twenty years of age. Twenty! Modestly he touched upon the physical charm—"So fresh and so fair!"—and all the desire of his youth flamed in the words.

He emphasised his eulogy on the moral side—candid, gentle, fearless; his intellectual confidante. Assuredly she had given him much of her serenity.

Alas, at the moment when their horizon was widening, she was struck down by meningitis. Gandolphe pictured to Jean his distress on that day, four years ago, when after interring the partner of his destiny, he found himself at home again with the two little children——

"Yes, it's true; you still had—" Darboise's heart swelled at the thought of his own, his Momo, who was getting a bigger boy so far from him; and he durst not put any more questions, remembering confusedly what Cazenave had told him. The sergeant went on in a hollow voice:

"You know what happened. I joined up on August 4th, having entrusted them to my mother-in-law who lived at Valenciennes. When the Germans arrived she died of shock to the heart."

"And they—they——?"

"No news—for a long time—and then it was only by a roundabout way I learned at last—taken away into Germany, I heard it said—ill cared for—they died—one a few weeks after the other."

His head dropped. Jean was silent, and other things he knew came back to his mind—Gandolphe's house at Arras, destroyed with everything in it, his family souvenirs, his papers, notes, and manuscripts. He who never ceased to glorify the grandeur and beauty of life, he it was who had plumbed the depths of human misery!

The sergeant explained quietly how he had but lately rallied again, through his desire for reaction, of wrestling with the suffering all round him. His own grief, which never left him, inspired him with immense pity for all other wounded hearts.

"Alone for always, now?" Jean said to him, overwhelmed by the sense of his own isolation.

Then Gandolphe hinted that—if he had found—if he should find, another—a second comrade—to help him in his task— That, indeed, was Jeanne's advice, with her last words.

That evening, as Jean was thinking over their conversation he said to himself: "Do I know a woman who would like to be happy?" And the following Tuesday, at Malo, his eyes fell on his friend just as he was taking some music from Sylvaine's hands. The awkwardness of his bearing and the timid light in his eyes were a sudden revelation to Jean: Was Gandolphe in love?

Instantly, many a supporting fact occurred to

Jean's mind, as well as Gandolphe's anxious obstinacy in the matter of being introduced into Primrose Villa.

Alas! Would it not have been better for him had he never crossed the threshold? A university man, but without a future; a widower, and he would never see forty again. No doubt some other husband was in view for the captivating heiress. And Jean remembered, too, all that sorrowful idyll of the fiancé killed in action, and the disconsolateness of the innocent heart.

All the same, curiosity and benevolence stimulated Darboise. One day when he reached Malo before his companion, he boldly launched into eulogy of the sergeant—a fine soul, a generous heart, and perhaps the most broad-minded intelligence he had known. Neither did Jean disguise what he owed to him.

M. d'Estignard agreed. Madame also seemed to approve of the panegyric. But she could not help making some slight criticisms. What was it that the excellent fellow lacked? Nothing but certain—refinements. It is at table that one judges a man, and when he came to lunch the other day, she watched him. What a pity it was that "he used his knife to cut his fish up, and put his bread into his gravy with his fingers!"

"Those are little matters!" Sylvaine interposed,—she had been silent till then. Didn't they think he would get out of them?

Jean made a note of her words, and as he looked

at her, hope began to dawn in him. Was he wrong? That alliance which had seemed impossible to him—ah, his resolve to return the good he had received! He chose the first pretext he could to let the sergeant know of the way his praises had been sung, and Gandolphe seemed secretly affected. Darboise went further and hinted with brotherly tact that if he could contrive to rid himself of a few tiny—blemishes——

Gandolphe blushed: "A rustic! I'm only a rustic!"

"You're an admirable chap!"

How near they were drawing together!—And the last step was not to be long in coming.

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It was now mid-September. Gandolphe heard from the Bureau that Darboise's leave was coming along.

"I shan't take it," said Jean.

"Now then! Won't you go home?"

"No, no—" Darboise cleared his throat, and then said:

"You know—or perhaps you don't know—that my wife——"

"Well?"

"It's all ended—between us——"

In his turn, now, Jean delivered himself up. In one breath he related his fault, his instant sorrow, the anxieties which followed, and the thundering blow of the separation.

As he finished, he asked: "What do you say of my position?"

"I say—that there's one—still worse."

"Whose?"

"The other's; your—friend, at St. Pol."

"Germaine?"

"What's become of her?"

Darboise felt vaguely ashamed as he admitted that she had disappeared from his life. Anyway, she was the cause of it, after all!

The sergeant looked at Jean: "When you think of her, have you no pity or remorse?"

"Yes, yes."

It is true that Jean, looking again into his heart, was touched to the quick by the memory recalled of the unhappy woman whose only fault in his regard was that she had yielded to him and loved him too much. Aloud he confessed that *her* circumstances, too——

"She is the most to be pitied," Gandolphe went on; "didn't she try to commit suicide?"

On the other hand, he thought that a satisfactory outcome of the relations between Jean and Andrée was possible: "A woman forgives."

But Jean recalled his wife's resolute words, and how her actions had borne them out.

"Nonsense!—in such times as these! And when she well knows how much you love her, and when she loves you——"

"Does she love me enough?"

All Jean asked was for some hope to embrace.

Rallying to Gandolphe's views, he besought him to find out what was happening to Germaine.

At the end of two days, the sergeant brought his first news. There had been a quarrel at the Trousseliers and a complete break. The old woman now left her flat only to go errands in the neighbourhood, where she poured out disparaging reflections on her daughter-in-law. The young woman shut herself up with the children on the ground floor and was hardly ever seen.

But when Gandolphe hastened to find Darboise at the school one evening after nine o'clock in the following week, his news was still worse. Trousselier, the husband, had been wounded by the explosion of a mine, badly wounded in the face, and report said that he was blinded. Something else, too—the sergeant had got it all from Madame the pork-butcher. The man had had a letter written for him in the hospital at Toulouse in which he asked for—his mother, and abused his wife with horrible curses.

“Told, evidently, and you can guess who told him? The old woman, and by the bye, she's getting ready to go to him. They tell me she's just written a request for a free railway pass.”

In consternation, seeing his own responsibility rising in front of him, Jean said:

“What can be done?”

“We must take action.”

“How?”

“First, prevent the old woman from going down yonder to inflame him.”

"Is there a way?"

"I might try to see her and dissuade her!"

The sergeant duly repaired to the Rue Jeanne d'Arc, but reappeared three-quarters of an hour later to report what a reception he had had!

The termagant had shown him the door, and no mistake about it. She shouted at him: "Clear out of here! You're his pal—I know you—I've seen you out walking together—it's no good—my lad shall know all that's gone on in his house—and he'll make that young fellow pay for it, the blackguard——!"

Jean's face went white: "As bad as that?"

"I was forced to clear—the neighbours were poking their noses out of the windows."

"And *she*—Germaine? You couldn't get to her?"

"Yes—I went again, and knocked on the ground-floor shutter. It opened, and I was able to get a few words in."

"What did you say to her?"

"That it was she—who must go to Toulouse—the only way to ward off the tragedy!"

"But if her mother-in-law—is going?"

"It's just that journey that's got to be thwarted."

The sergeant set forth his plan, which was to take advantage of Lavigne's connections—he had been on cordial terms with Lavigne for some time now—and his functions at the railway station.

"I'll look after all that."

The next evening he came to Darboise again with a railway permit in the name of "Madame Trousselier." The young woman would take her mother-in-law's place, and nobody would notice it. Then he said to Jean, "Come with me."

Darboise followed him, his heart beating fast.

Germaine! When he saw her, he hardly knew her. She was much thinner, wasted, and pale; and she wore that close dark shawl as on the night when he had driven her away. She did not look him in the face, and pretended to be speaking only to Gandolphe. And she spoke too fast, her emotion betraying her. Obstinate she repeated her wish not to live any longer, not to await the other's return.

Gandolphe spoke next, relieving Jean of a painful weight. He strove to appeal to her and rouse her. Let a veil be thrown over the past. He made no allusion to their guilt, but only to their double adversity, which must be put right. In both cases, it was not they only who were in question—there were innocent children whose homes these sorrows were breaking up.

Germaine's head sank. At last she said:

"But then—what ought I to do?"

Gandolphe gave his opinion. She must take the lead and hasten to her husband's bedside, where he lay wounded and in pain. It was her truest task to comfort him, and the only way of defending herself.

He handed the travel permit to her. The

suggestion obviously took her unawares. In perplexity her lips parted to speak, but closed again. There appeared reason to fear that she would fly from a solution which on her part would necessitate an almost heroic tension of the nerves. Then Jean, who so far had hesitated to interpose, said:

"You must do that, Germaine."

When she heard her Christian name, uttered with a sort of tenderness by the loved voice she had not thought to hear again, she began to cry:

"You—have you no more grudge against me, then?"

After what had happened, that there should still be no malice in her! He assured her that he retained feelings of fond and tenacious friendship for her.

"And you¹ want—do you¹ want—me to go?"

"It would be best."

"When I come back—I shall see you again?"

Jean hesitated.

"Yes," said Gandolphe, feeling that there was no danger in the undertaking.

Germaine was persuaded. Obediently she went to the Prefecture to get her permit; and before setting off she instructed little Désiré, as she put him to bed that he must wait till tomorrow before he gave this note to his grandmother,—and the child's eyes closed.

¹Impossible—alas!—to express in English the pretty play which the French novelist can introduce between *tu* and *vous*.—TR.

As they were returning from seeing her off at the station, Gandolphe touched Jean's shoulder and said with a happy smile:

"One good point scored already!"

"One only!"

"There'll be more to follow." The sergeant added: "Listen, Darboise. In five days from now, *I'm* going on leave. *I* shall go and see your wife. I shall argue with her. What would you say if I brought her back to you?"

"Oh, if it were possible—!" said Jean.

"Well?"

"It would bring you good luck—in what *you* want!"

"I? What I want?" Gandolphe murmured, as he took off his eyeglasses and began to polish them: "You know what I wish for?"

"And I wish it as much as you."

No other word was said. But they walked with a more confident step, and each of them felt his wonderful hope strengthened by his friend's approving desire.

BOOK IX

CHAPTER I

A FRIENDLY MISSION

How he missed Gandolphe, who had been on leave now for three days, and would be still five more! Darboise realised the place the sergeant had taken in his life. Then, too, when he went away, he had taken two addresses with him and declared his intention of making a great effort in the matter of Andrée. Now that he had seen him start on that errand, Jean was filled again with immense hope.

Depussay, who had taken Gandolphe's place in command of the "fatigue," had seen fit to remove Dubar, Poitu, and Couvret, to the advantage of three of his own men. And these three he had placed in the best "posts," shamelessly dispatching old Pincivy, who had varicose veins, to Post 8, the farthest.

After the first day, Darboise offered to change places with Pincivy, which he gladly agreed to, as his poor legs were swelling. The example had good results. One of the newcomers, Doguet,

gave up his place for Leduc's, No. 7, the latter finding the long distance too much for him.

Darboise quickly made himself comfortable in his remote sentry-box among the dunes. It did not happen three times a day that he had to run after some fisherman, wandering into the zone of danger. He sat on the warm sand, weighing hopes whose realisation he yielded to fate.

Perhaps, when Gandolphe came back—! Jean repeated his words—"If I brought her back to you—" and his heart beat high with hope. But if the attempt failed? Ah, the blackest resolutions were ready to assail him again!

Sometimes he went as far as his neighbour, good Doguet. Plump and shaggy, with the eyes of a spaniel, the man was of the race of the simple and confiding. He had lost his wife in the first months of the war. He did not dwell on the grief that her death had caused him. The chief thing, he said, was that his three babies were orphans. It was not that the future troubled him much. If he escaped from the war, and it seemed to be going that way, he could always get out of difficulties, with that good farm of his that the sun shone on. But the present! Impossible, wasn't it, to send for the kiddies to St. Pol. They had been taken in by their aunt, and it was bad luck that he was just jangling with her about matters of inheritance, and they couldn't agree, and the children were not looked after properly. Although he paid her fifty francs a month the woman was always

threatening to hand them over to the Board of Guardians.

"That'd be a rare bother to me!" Doguet concluded, with an anxious air.

At the price of a few kindly words, Darboise quickly established himself as a friend. The good fellow went easily on to other confidences: "At forty-two years, sonny, I don't yet find myself quite worn out."

"Well—you must marry again, old chap!"

"I don't say no; but chance is a fine thing!"

The excellent Doguet added: "A widow, too, we'll suppose, and she might have some kiddies,—I wouldn't care a damn! All the lot could grow up pell-mell!"

"And you'd have others, still!" said Jean, chaffingly.

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A letter from Gandolphe. Jean opened it trembling. Did it bring him news? No. The sergeant had found the house shut up in the Rue de Vaugirard—"the ladies were always in the country." He was arranging for Friday, his last day but one, when he counted on getting as far as Sceaux. The incomparable friend!

That evening, being free in good time, Jean betook himself to his cousins, where he found M. d'Estignard alone. After a quarter of an hour's talk, Darboise got up, but his host stopped him:

"There's no hurry. I don't often get the chance of a chat with you."

Jean sat down again. Shaking the ash off his cigar, the old man went on:

"Have you read Briand's speech on 'Impossible Peace'?"

"Yes—alas!"

"What do you think of it?"

"I don't allow myself—to have an opinion on that subject."

Darboise now made Gandolphe's theory his own—only a few men, placed at the wheel of government, could know whither they were leading the country. We must trust them!

M. d'Estignard sighed:

"Yes, to you who are young, that patience and strength come easier than to us. We others, in face of this catastrophe which threatens to destroy all we have built up, feel that we shall not have the time to build again!"

The old man confessed his troubles. They were financial to begin with, and Jean could not have believed them so serious. Almost their entire fortune was invested in South American stocks, and they had mostly ceased to pay dividends. It was necessary to sell out and realise—at what a loss!

"And that is not our only anxiety!" he went on. His son, the little assistant surgeon, never got away from the worst parts of the Somme. Three of his orderlies had been struck down at his side a few days ago.

“And my daughter——”

His accent became hesitant. Certainly, with her beauty and the dowry which had lately been set apart for her, there would be no lack of aspirants for her hand. She was rightly critical, and how many had she refused? Her parents put no pressure whatever on her. The young heart would awake in the end. (The father thought he was telling Jean something he did not know.) Since her misfortune, they had not dared to speak to her about any one. Now she was nearly twenty-five. Their own position had much altered; and, alas, how they were stripping the country of the men who might have been husbands for the girls of that age!

“But she herself,—how does she seem to be disposed about it?” Jean ventured to ask.

“I don’t know. I have just an impression that if—a good lad turned up, following some respectable profession——”

One might guess to whom Darboise’s thoughts went. What a prospect opened out before him when, a few minutes later, M. d’Estignard, rather awkwardly, led the talk on to Gandolphe!

“He’s not—a Fellow of his university, is he?”

“The degree will be conferred, the day after the war, no doubt, on those who like him have been several times admissible.”

Jean gave some details of the sum, already respectable, of a professor’s emoluments with the almost certain addition of teaching fees.

There was a sound of footsteps and the door opened; the ladies had returned.

"Our cousin, who's been lost to sight!"

It was still the same affectionate welcome to which he responded. They made him stay some time, and as soon as he had adroitly introduced Gandolphe's name, he had the satisfaction of seeing their faces brighten. Madame d'Estignard had received a respectful note from Paris in which the sergeant informed her that he had succeeded in hunting down the almost unprocurable music they had asked him to buy for them. Everyone praised his willingness and ability; and what struck Jean this time was the absence of even the minute criticisms of the other day. Were the merits of this aspirant already being domestically weighed? Only one thing disconcerted Darboise—the absolute freedom of mind which the girl displayed, the playfulness with which she deplored the absence of her accompanist:

"My piano has nothing to say to me now!"

Was that not at least a sign of indifference? Jean thought of his friend's enchantment when he was told, as he would be soon, what she had said.

And he himself, what news had he brought them? But was not all this *too* beautiful?

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The mistrustful thought was too well justified. Three days went by without a letter from the

sergeant. All through Friday evening Darboise hoped for a telegram, but it did not come. Was Gandolphe keeping the answer back so as to bring it himself? No, he would not have delayed his friend's happiness by an hour.

And so on Monday evening, when Jean saw him—saw that his smile was a little forced—he understood:

“She would not see you then?”

The sergeant took his arm and led him away. He was frank, as he had to be. He told Jean how he had taken the train to Denfert-Rochereau. In the street to which an urchin directed him he found the house, buried in ivy. A maid opened the door and informed him that the ladies had gone out. Would they be back soon? Certainly. He would call again. But—the alarm had been given. It was a mistake, he acknowledged, not to have thought of concealing the number on his badge.

“Did the maid look at it?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“A dark woman, was she?”

“Yes, rather sturdily built.”

“She's the mere tool of my mother-in-law!”

“When I went back, she told me that Madame Darboise was poorly, and would I call again another day?”

“Did you insist?”

“I sent her back to her mistress to say that my leave was up and I was going back, and my message was urgent.”

"No answer?"

"Only this—that madame begged to be excused."

Jean was sufficiently master of himself to refrain from the slightest reproach. He only rubbed his hands together, and said ironically:

"What did I tell you?"

"All isn't lost!"

"For goodness' sake, don't treat me like a child. There's my wife leaves me suddenly, without a word of explanation, returns me her wedding-ring, refuses to see the man she thinks I have sent—" He had the unkindness to add: "I almost—regret your overtures." But immediately: "My dear boy, I well know your brotherly intent—but I was sure of the result. She's in the power of the grandmother, who never liked me. I expect they stir each other up!"

The thought seemed to irritate him. "What I can't permit, is this way of leaving me without news of my child!"

Gandolphe still urged him to have courage. Darboise's smile was distressing as he said:

"Oh, I'm cured—that's agreed! You needn't fear any more that I shall—do anything daft!"

Even as he said the words, such a flavour of bitterness rose again to his lips that he almost wished once more to take the plunge into space.

The sergeant sounded him, a moment later, to find out if he had been back to Malo.

"Yes," he said, "once or twice." It was an

unconfessable feeling, that repugnance to open for his friend the prospect which had just faded for himself. Another day—tomorrow, say!

But he was silent the next day, too.

Here, now, were orders that a "transit fatigue" should be formed, on a par with the regular fatigue of the Textile; and fifty men were required for it. Which N. C. O. would lead them? It hardly looked a desirable position, as there were always things to be on one's guard against when putting a new service on its feet.

Two days after his return, it was announced to Gandolphe that the mischance was falling on him; Depussay was taking his place at the firing-ground. Fauvel had thus arranged it.

The sergeant was resigned to it—what else could he be? "It's we who will suffer," Darboise said to him.

"Then ask if you can come to the 'transit' with me!"

Jean seemed to be turning it over. He should be sorry to leave the delicious idleness they enjoyed on the dunes. Gandolphe correctly guessed the reasons for his hesitation, but did not fear to insist: "I should be glad to have you. You'll do it for me?"

Darboise went red. "If you think the adjutant will allow me?"

Monade made no opposition. There were plenty of civilians available for the "firing fatigue," since it was a "cushy" job.

Jean would have been ashamed had he avoided the new fatigue, for all the former members of the little group, Gautier Charles at their head, went to the sergeant and pressed their wish to follow him in his new destiny.

So they went over solidly to the "transit." Darboise met old Doguet: "And you,—aren't you coming with us?"

"I don't know," he said, "unless it's for the sake of staying among pals."

And that evening he made the same overtures, which were crowned with the same success.

CHAPTER II

NEW CONDITIONS

BEFORE leading them to the Port, Gandolphe had gathered his trusty men together:

"It's understood, eh, that you're going to set a good example?"

"Of course!"

Their willingness was obvious. Questions were asked of the sergeant. What did he know about the job?

"Very little; but this at least, that we shan't have Dubus on the top of us. The 'transit' has been put under the direction of Chasles, the little attaché with the fair moustache, you know; they say he's quite all right——"

"Though he's never been to the front!" said Gautier Charles, with a little grimace.

Gandolphe overheard the remark:

"Are you certain of it? Is it his fault? Don't blame him for being alive!"

Contrary to their hopes, the beginning was thankless enough. Just the same as the men of the Textile, they had to be at work on the stroke of six o'clock. And the aggravating part of it

was that for want of available waggon, a good hour had first of all to be wasted, while they sat and shivered idly in the chilly dawns of the end of September.

Corporal Quentin, of the Section, the chief ruler of the Yard, did not turn up till past seven. The man was rather disagreeable, slow, exacting, and sly. He contented himself with giving a few brief hints in an indolent tone to the non-coms. of the fatigue. They must get out of their own difficulties, and they must not mind spying on the men and reporting them, if the work was hanging fire.

And from the first day there were disputes of command between the sergeant and himself.

Quentin ordered the whole team one morning on board a vessel that was discharging her cargo, a task which had been reserved for civilians because of the risks it involved, such as descending into the hold by vertical ladders with narrow and slippery rungs.

The old man jibbed. Good old Doguet, with one foot in space, cried off, pleading dizziness. Gandolphe interposed, protesting against this breach of the regulations. Quentin had to give way, and the sergeant led his men back in triumph to their usual work, which was nothing if not painful.

Sometimes they had to lift, carry, and load the sheets of corrugated iron, flat or curved, whose ragged edges grazed their unaccustomed hands;

sometimes coils of wire, bales of gas-masks and bandages, or cases of cartridges, often bordering on half a ton weight, which ten or twelve men did not find themselves too many to lift on to the trolleys. In all weathers three great cranes were diving for these materials into the bowels of English steamers—the *Baron Humphrey*, the *Dartmoor*, the *Gloucester Castle*, which followed each other to the quay. The duty of the civilian dockers ended with bringing them ashore, under tarpaulins. Secret hostility prevailed between them and the soldiers, who had to take charge of them and get them into the waggons that were waiting on the rails sometimes a quarter of a mile away. The waggons were often the wrong sort for the use expected of them, and it happened that they found themselves forced to empty again some which they had just loaded up to ten tons; for their sides being inadequate, the railway people would have refused them. Obstructions followed on the platforms. Then the civilians accused the military of skulking, and Corporal Quentin frowned and congealed into icy dissatisfaction.

Nothing could be more discouraging to those men who had really made serious efforts. But all in the fatigue were not of good and steadfast mind. They included hotheads, some of the former members of the “coffee fatigue”—Thuillier, and Languenac, by whom Gautier Charles was fascinated. A clique was formed again, which made overtures to Jean.

He opposed them; but once when the sergeant was on rest, he yielded to the temptation to file off after the others. Decante, dodging the "coal fatigue," rejoined them, and at once the "Go-easy Brigade" was reformed almost in completeness. And Corporal Valentin did not miss the chance of denouncing Darboise to Quentin, who grumbled: "Yes, yes, I've already noticed that little gentleman."

"He's the sergeant's pet, you know!"

The attaché, Chasles, who was rarely seen in the ordinary way, came round twice that day:

"Not getting on with it, Quentin?"

"Can't be helped, lieutenant, with that team!"

"Where's the sergeant?"

"God knows!"

Gandolphe was sent for the next day, and had to submit to protests. Really, his men were not up to the mark. If that went on, the attaché would be obliged to make a complaint.

With emotion the sergeant asked the attaché's leave to make a few remarks in his turn. Boldly he pointed out that one of the little things which he admitted might injuriously affect his men was just that hour of stupid inaction every morning, when they had had the unpleasantness of getting up early on foggy mornings.

The argument appeared to strike Chasles: "Well then; from now onward, don't bring the men till seven o'clock; I'll take the responsibility."

Gandolphe thanked him; and was encouraged to submit a few more reflections. Perhaps, also, the work was not always quite judiciously arranged. The unshipped material was sometimes handled three times before entrained. There was the acknowledged hostility between them and the civilian workers, and the constant periods of idling due to the absence of trucks. Why not follow the example of the English who, not far away, had arranged to unload their cargoes straight from the ships into the waggons?

The attaché's first sign was one of irritation, as though a non-com. should not lay down the law to a quite superior being. But the sergeant's modest demeanour, his correct way of talking, the sound sense that his words revealed ended by convincing him, and he overcame the accursed prejudices of his rank.

"I'll speak to Quentin; perhaps you're right," he said.

From another talk which they had that very evening, Gandolphe brought away the beginnings of welcome improvements. Mustering his men, he said: "My first good news for you is that our work will now begin at seven o'clock."

There was an explosion of delight: "Now, that's not so stupid! That's good luck!"

Another thing; the lieutenant granted an interval of twenty minutes, at nine o'clock and at four, so that they could eat a snack. Every day, too, as far as possible, a limited job would be set them

—so many trucks to load, and after that, they would be free to go away!

“How many, for instance?”

“That depends.”

“Waggons of galvanized iron, suppose?”

“Fifteen. That’s the figure settled with Corporal Quentin.”

Some made grimaces, but the majority congratulated themselves—“If we all put our backs to it!”

The new conditions came into operation at once, and the sergeant had the inspiration of classifying his men according to their physical ability. Some were smarter at loading the trolleys and some at the waggons. Mortas was an expert at roping. Some of the wounded, Darboise among others, in spite of some protests, found themselves appointed checkers. With each one well up in his duties, labour was lightened. Gandolphe applied himself also to setting up better relations with the civilian element. Among the latter were some foremen and crane-drivers whom his good nature won over. Their men discovered their benefit, for the majority were on piece-work, according to the new system set up. In their turn they insisted that there should be no more shortage of waggons, and that department, with which they were on good terms, complied with their demands.

At the same time the sergeant was carrying on a campaign at headquarters to obtain a weekly

rest-day. On Sundays the dockers did not come. A note written by Chasles ended by bringing it off.

The consequence was seen in a few days in the fatigue's remarkably improved results. And the men were to be envied. They did not "sign on" until seven; they escaped the terror and oppression of the Textile; they were intelligently employed—they knew what they had to do and why they did it.

Above all, the wonder was that they had only praise for their leaders. In his turn, Quentin took the hint and softened his manners, astonished at the progress accomplished. The attaché came by and was lavish in words of encouragement.

At a time of urgent work in hand, there were two days of rain. In face of the heavy downpour, Chasles gave an order to the men to take shelter. They instantly got under the tarpaulins hard by, while in the next yard Dubus was going to and fro in his old waterproof, his dog at his heels, and never ceased to worry his men, who were drenched and benumbed and had not a minute of respite.

Towards two o'clock on the second day, as the rain was dwindling, Gandolphe went round the "tents." "What about getting into it again, boys, and give the lieutenant a surprise?"

With a hearty will and excited rivalry, they performed in three hours the work of an entire day! When the quay was cleared, they could set about unloading the *Dartmoor*.

When the attaché rather gloomily reappeared at the end of the day, his stupefaction was followed by an expansive smile: "Ah, you're the right sorts!" So that the hearts of all were warmed.

It was good to drink that cup of wine that Chasles had distributed the next day—at the expense of the section; and little work was done that day. At three o'clock the delighted men were sent away to St. Pol.

CHAPTER III

KINDLY FEELING AWAKENED

FOR some time at the beginning of that period, strangely enough, Jean was slightly cool towards Gandolphe. Was it resentment that the other had not succeeded in his daring mission, or unjustifiable annoyance on finding him so fair in the discharge of duty that he did not hesitate to give Jean a hint or two when he deserved it?

Whichever it was, they had ceased to go out together in the evening. Darboise pretended that he did not much enjoy Lavigne's society, and when he was sounded on the point of going again to Malo, he had had the cruelty to affect a chilling indifference:

"You go, my friend!"

"Not without you!"

And the first time the sergeant spoke to him of the amends due to Germaine, Jean rebelled:

"Look here, I'm tired to death of that business. She's a woman of twenty-three years and no simpleton. We did wrong, no doubt, and it's turned out badly; but tell me, is she the only one to be pitied? Her home may be ruined! Well, isn't mine, too? Her husband, wounded you say,

and all ill-luck fallen on their heads? I don't find it so damned interesting. He's a drunkard by what she's told me, a blackguard, another Mafranc. She? She's neurasthenic—hysterical—I could tell you——

Gandolphe let the flood of words go by:

"Twenty-three?" he said at last: "Ah, let me ask you, from what you've told me yourself, isn't she a child, Darboise, a little child?"

"But—what is it you want me to do now?"

"There's only one thing to be feared—the mother's attitude."

"The old woman's still here?"

"Still. She's chewing the rag of revenge. It's when her son returns—that there'll be danger."

"Soon, do you think?"

"Soon, yes."

"Nothing wrong yet, yonder, between the husband and Germaine?"

"Nothing so far; I've been finding out."

The conversation rested there. But several days later the sergeant said to Darboise: "I've been to the old woman again."

"And she would see you?"

"If you can call it seeing me!"

"She insulted you?"

"A virago—wouldn't listen to anything."

"And then?"

"I shall go again."

And Gandolphe did go again to the Rue Jeanne d'Arc. This determination astonished the Trousse-

lier woman, and nonplussed her; particularly since he was always correct, clear, and composed. And between the volleys of insult which he stoically endured, he ended by making a few fragments of his arguments heard: Think! Did she wish for complete disaster on all her people?

"Can't be worse!" she cried: "Not a sou among us! And my lad blind!"

He strove hard to cheer her up. Were there not activities on foot, pretty nearly everywhere and notably at Caen, to assist mutilated soldiers?

"A fat lot he'll fancy that! A man ruined and done for!"

"Don't discourage him more than he is!"

"Ah, shut up, damn you!"

So it ended in curses. Rage overcame her again when she thought of their scattered savings, of her son reduced to this—a wretched parasite for the rest of his life. Everything had been taken away from them at once—even to the ground-floor rooms, which she was no nearer letting. And all that, she repeated, was thanks to a pretty gentleman!

But at the bottom of that embittered soul, Gandolphe detected the survival of a kindly feeling. She worshipped her grandchildren, whom she had taken in. The sergeant often surprised her in the act of dandling them with loving words—"My poor little darlings, my duckies!"

He ventured to admonish her: "For their sake! It's in their name that I'm pleading!"

"That's likely!" In a heart-broken voice she added: "The darling treasures! They've come into a miserable time—and I'm sure they'll never get over it!"

She had fears on little Gabriel's account, weak from birth, prematurely weaned, and who suffered from the heat so much that he "had had enteritis" for a week. He was pale, his eyes horribly dull, his stomach swollen. He had become suddenly worse, and the old doctor had despaired of him at once.

The grandmother thought she would go mad, and Gandolphe found her sobbing.

"You must take him to the Dispensary," he said.

"What Dispensary?"

The Mayor of Dunkerque, whom the sergeant had met, had told him recently of certain results obtained by the subcutaneous injection of seawater. Gandolphe repeated what he had heard: "Something worth trying, perhaps——"

"Is it to pay for?" the old woman asked.

"Yes; one pays, on principle; but it isn't ruinous." She seemed to be suspicious of entirely gratuitous treatment.

"But," she asked, "is it open for—the St. Pol children?"

"It would be open for little niggers if there were any to save!"

The sergeant gave her the address. When she took the baby to the consulting-room next day,

the nurse, who had been a hospital Sister, nearly got angry: "And it's only *now* you're bringing him!" Weighing the dying infant in her hands, she said no more. Nothing could be done but try what she usually tried in desperate cases—three injections of three hundred grammes each time.

As the infant was still breathing next day, he was given the same dose—with miraculous results. At the fourth examination the eyes had brightened, the complexion cleared, he was livelier, he was saved.

The grandmother, profoundly moved, did not express her gratitude to Gandolphe aloud. She merely thanked him by giving him the freedom of her house. So he went again, more constantly. He played with the children. He chatted with the old woman, who now condescended to answer him, making free to stop him and put him in his place as soon as he "attacked her in that matter," as she put it.

"I'm waiting for my boy! You'll see!"

CHAPTER IV

A TRIO

THIS first success astonished Jean. He admired this good genius of his and was annoyed with himself for the reserve he had shown him lately. Happily, he knew the way to atone for it:

"Come and see my cousins," he said: "they were asking for you the other day!"

They betook themselves to Malo. As a result, no doubt, of their interrupted relations, which in Gandolphe's case had lasted nearly a month, their welcome at the villa was cool, and especially the young lady's. There was no mention of music till late, and then Sylvaine professed hoarseness.

Marcel, the son, had been home on leave, they learned, and had brought a friend. Jean when he heard this mentioned, wondered if by chance there was some project of marriage—? And perhaps it was lucky that he had only formally encouraged Gandolphe.

Their double disappointment brought them nearer to each other, and their intimacy was renewed. They began again to walk abroad in the evening; and often Lavigne was of the party.

Gandolphe took them to see the model institutions installed by the municipality: the Alexis-Jouffroy Nursery, with the animated treasure of healthy lungs, pink and chirping, which it sheltered; the Friendly Bureau, well lighted, well arranged, and spotless, where social assistance in no way reflects upon the dignity of the poor; the School of Applied Industry, which had just begun a new term, and where they stayed longer.

There were sixty youths there, slim, clad in blue drill, with fresh and attentive faces, whose honesty was striking. It was pleasant to watch them, so engrossed in the slow movement of the lathes that dropped dribblets of metal, or minutely busy with the control of machine-tools. Other workshops were fitted up for joinery and the planing-machines. Elsewhere, watching the novices at the forge dragging about heavy shovels of blazing embers, one wanted to cry, "Mind, children! Don't play with fire!" But the precision of their movement clearly spoke of precocious efficiency.

"Look now! There's fine work!" exclaimed the old foreman, superintendent of the practical work, as he showed our friends some little wonders of the fitter's art, that had won prizes in the end-of-term competition.

In a corner three discharged soldiers, mutilated in the legs, peasants for whom all farm-labour was ended, were learning a new calling from their little comrades. Their child-like souls were grow-

ing young again in those surroundings, and everybody joked and whistled.

Jean admired the scene. Lavigne was prolific of ingenuous exclamations.

Good old Lavigne! Decidedly the best fellow in the world—and what virtue like goodness? The society of his new friends, too, was beginning to appear of service to him. He had not nearly so many chances for drinking, to begin with; no more of those interminable visits to the Café Terminus, either. Flattered to feel himself sought for, he became more communicative, and revealed his nature wholly. Certainly he was almost devoid of practical intelligence, and in some respects a big child. But even then he had an innocently original mind, and some culture. Above all, Jean found that he was comparatively well-informed in all matters touching the fine arts, a taste, he said, which he owed to his father, a connoisseur. All one evening they discussed the merits of Chinard.

“He has talent,” Darboise allowed. “But wait till Monday, and I’ll show you then what I call his dodges!”

But on the following Monday, Chinard’s drawing did not appear; and the next week, in place of it, there was a caricature by Métivet. Could he be ill—or away from Paris? Jean debated these theories. Or—had he fallen out of favour? So much the worse for him!

Lavigne appeared enchanted by all that Socialist teaching with some of whose beneficent applica-

tions Gandolphe had put him directly in touch. He even took it into his head to make notes!

"For himself?" Jean asked.

"No. But I think it may interest—my brother-in-law"—who was the mayor, he explained, of a little place in Central France.

Both mischievously and ingeniously Gandolphe amused himself by preaching to him the gospel of anti-alcohol; and the other in all innocence approved—he who had never dreamed that he was gradually becoming a dipsomaniac. One evening when they came to fetch Darboise, Mafranc was in one of his bad days, and filling the house with his bawling and hiccups. Jean wanted to take them away.

"No, let's make use of it!" Gandolphe advised.

The drunkard having ended by going down into the cellar, foaming at the mouth, they gathered some sorrowful confidences from his wife—ah, the viciousness of her man, the abomination of his life!

"He'll kill us, monsieur. It'll end badly! The other day he flourished his knife and threatened my big boy, Armand. I had to shut the child up and pretend that the key was lost——"

"You put up with that?" said Gandolphe.

The woman admitted: "That makes three times—that I've run away from home, with the little ones because—he gave us blows, and no money. And every time, these police gentlemen, when I go to ask their advice, they say, 'Make it up with him.'"

"They're wrong, possibly."

"Whatever will become of me, with my four little unhappy ones! But for them, it'd be soon over—I'd fling myself into the canal."

Jean started—she as well! And what sort of reprimand could do any good in this case? Now the woman brightened up and told them, as a pleasant memory, the story of the baker's man above, who got tired of the drunkard's songs and rattled downstairs one night and gave him a masterly hiding, with the result that Mafranc was quiet for a week.

Gandolphe listened to the story and was forced to feel his impotence. The children were gathered round, and supported their mother by their looks. The girl, who was fourteen but looked no more than ten, was delicate and fair, with a pretty face. She laughed wildly at the recollection of the lesson inflicted; and the boy Armand, whom the drunkard lately chased with his knife in hand, expressed his frank desire aloud:

"If only papa would die!"

Our three companions went away: "What do you think of it, Lavigne, old chap?"

"I think it's heart-breaking! That damned alcohol!"

"For the sake of example," Gandolphe went on, "I think I'll drink nothing in future—but water."

"*I'll* promise that," Jean declared.

Lavigne hesitated: "I take only a stout now and again!"

"A question of principle!"

"Would it please you?"

"Water-drinkers, we three. Is it agreed?"

"Agreed, agreed!"

Darboise still pondered, as he went, the sadness of the home he had just left:

"It's that woman who's to be pitied! It's those little ones!"

One would have said that he was harbouring some plan.

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Some weeks went by. The brotherhood grew closer among the members of the trio, thanks to those long talks every evening in which fancy and reason mingled and got entangled.

Lavigne was laying by new surprises for his comrades, in the revelation of certain unexpected forms of sensitiveness in him.

His duties at the station often kept him there by night; and his great pleasure, he explained, was to wander among the deserted platforms and explore the black space that the many-coloured signals pierced, to peer into the mysterious firmament over his head, whence sometimes a deadly missile would fall, hardly announced by the purring of a motor. He felt the strange poetry of the scene and of that state of war; he reciprocated it with mystic passion, a sort of pantheistic fervour. Though he rarely went to the Port, he was worth hearing when he described the impressions he

received in passing through. It seemed to him, for instance, in the hours of the Port's daily animation, as if he had found France stretched out full length like some gigantic creature, unremittingly gathering in, with the swarming arms of the harbour's thousand cranes, all the things she required for her subsistence and her defence.

Jean appreciated the wide and inspiring symbolism of the picture. He too had felt himself impressed in the long run by the sustained amplitude of the huge effort, of which only a tiny part was being revealed within the frame of those hangars and those platforms.

Their work in the "transit" being for the time less intense, Gandolphe guided him in strolls under the enormous arches and along the humming quays, by the colossal hulls of discharging ships.

"The Textile, now; I suppose you think you know it?"

The sergeant led him there, and together they scrambled up the sides of the pyramids of sacks. From that height, as though they looked down on a rough sea, they commanded a view over the hundreds of thousands of sacks of wheat, oats, and rice, the cargoes of ten vessels. And they discovered as it were the fauna of these unknown regions—the team of window-cleaners, a dozen companions in soot-soiled calico, moving briskly about on the narrow planks thrown as gangways over the abysses.

The Port, too, offered its wonders to their

investigations. Jean was both surprised and interested,—in the electricity works and the oily movement of its monstrous machines, in the torpedo-boats of the “patrol,” and in the British monitors, a sort of pontoon that bristled with huge guns. They measured with their eyes those graving-docks, where a shelled steamer was having its severe wounds dressed; they pushed on to the lighthouse, and farther still, to the latticed pier that was washed by the leaping waves of the equinoctial tides.

“Are you like me?” Gandolphe said: “It seems to me that the better I know this scene the more I like it!”

“Yes, it’s got a mug of its own!” Jean confessed, and under that expression of the painter’s slang, one could divine the understanding and appreciation awakened in him for the rough but rich environment in which he was beginning to expand.

It was some time now since they had touched on more intimate subjects; but one evening when they were out together, Andrée’s name was mentioned. Even the sergeant seemed no longer to urge confidence on him:

“It’s certain,” he admitted, “that if she’s a woman of settled determination, as you say, the intellectual inflexible——”

“Intellectual—her? She’s all impulse and instinct.”

Jean let himself go on to recall some memories of the times of their happiness, the days of childish

pranks which were glorified by their mutual affection; and as Gandolphe seemed still incredulous, he went one better. From the lovingly-guarded bundle he took some letters at random. Among them he happened on that incomparable letter which had once snatched him from a base temptation. When the sergeant had read it:

"My word, how she loved you!" he said.
"How guilty you were!"

Jean had no answer to make, and the other went on:

"But I say again, a woman who loves like that, forgives."

"But you've seen——"

"Let time have effect! Would you like me to write to her?"

"Shall *I*?"

"Or you, indeed. Why not?"

Darboise wanted no other advice. That same evening he dashed off some lines of entreaty, touching and loving,—so loving that he dared not show them even to Gandolphe.

And for several days hope revived in his heart.

CHAPTER V

A TREATY OF RECONCILIATION

BUT what anxiety took possession of him anew that morning when his friend informed him that Germaine's return with the blind man was imminent!

"Don't you think that the old woman—will——?"

The sergeant durst not re-assure him overmuch.

It was the very evening arranged for the return, and they could not stand it. Compelled by the fear of some tragedy, they went and strolled towards eight o'clock under the windows of the house in the Rue Jeanne d'Arc. There was nothing. They went back a little later,—for, some days since, the sergeant had brought about the renewal of Jean's permission to sleep in the town.

This time they could hear, inside the house, the sound of a husky voice, which seemed sometime to be complaining and sometimes to explode in anger. Surely his mother had not told him?

"Shall we go in?" said the sergeant.

Jean recoiled: "Not I!"

The next day, without telling Darboise, Gan-

dolphe went again and knocked at the Trousseliers' door. Germaine opened it; her look was harassed.

"How—has it gone on?"

"No how yet."

"And your mother-in-law and you?"

"We don't speak a word to each other."

"And he,—does he notice it?"

"Of course!—That sets him thinking!"

"You must make it up," said Gandolphe seriously: "I know her now, your mother-in-law. She's not so spiteful."

Germaine shook her head dubiously. Then, timidly, she asked in her turn for news of Jean. He gave it, and she went on:

"Is he all right again—with his wife?"

"No, no."

"Is he always sad, then?"

"Always."

"That's my biggest trouble."

"He, too; what worries him above all is the position in your home."

"Really?"

He assured her it was so; and a gleam of joy appeared on the disconsolate face at the thought that she was not an object only of indifference to him.

"He wants nothing so much," the sergeant went on, "as to see you all on good terms again in your house, and to know that you are happy."

Alas! She told him of the alarms amidst which she was living. The blind man, enraged by the

misfortune which had crowned two years of military slavery, had taken to drink again the moment he left the hospital. The journey had been dreadful, and there was a scene in the station at Bourges. Since he got back, he talked of nothing but blowing the whole place up, and he was even expecting some bombs that a friend was to bring him.

"I'd like to see him," said Gandolphe.

"You're not afraid?"

"What of?"

They went together into the room. The old woman was stupefied when she saw him on the threshold, but got up and greeted him. Little Désiré hurried up and the sergeant fondled him. He found Trousselier sunk in an armchair, with pallid face and a black bandage over his eyes.

"Who's that?" he cried in a surly voice.

"A neighbour," Germaine said.

"Neighbour? Which?"

The old woman ventured: "It's the sergeant—it's him that told us where to take the little one."

"And what's he come for?" said the blind man.

"To make your acquaintance, to offer to help you in any way, old chap."

"To make a fool of me, you mean?"

"If I could do anything for you?"

"I want nobody."

"That's what he's like!" murmured Germaine in a tone of vexation.

"I'm what it pleases me to be, to begin with. And they can come and see me when I ask them. I want no strangers in my house!"

"Right you are! Then I'll call again," said Gandolphe.

"No use coming again when you're not asked!"

An idea seemed to have taken hold of him. He got up and turned savagely towards his wife:

"This is your paramour, I suppose?"

The attack turned Germaine paler still:

"Joseph, don't talk like that——"

"I know!" he stuttered, his hands trembling with rage as he fumbled for the stick by his side: "I know you've brought him here so's you can both laugh in my face!"

"I'll come again," Gandolphe repeated, and he went into the next room. Germaine joined him there, and looking her full in the face, he said:

"He's been drinking?"

"To be sure! What else——?"

"You must take it away from him."

"He flies into a fury——"

"Let him fly. It's got to be. Where do you put—the bottle?"

With a movement of her head she indicated the big cupboard in a corner of the room. He went and opened it. On one of the shelves, by some empty glasses, was a bottle of rum, secretly bought that morning at the corner tavern.

"We must take that away," he went on, "and he mustn't have any more."

As she hesitated, the blind man appeared at the door, groping his way:

"I can hear jawing," he cried. "Is that chap still there?"

Gandolphe seized the bottle with a decisive movement and went out. He did not go away, and returned almost at once. A violent scene was in progress. Trousselier was demanding his rum, and it was curious that while Germaine dared not intervene, it was the old woman who was standing up to her son:

"You can't have any more! It's done!"

"Can't I, by God!"

The man felt his way with extended arms to the cupboard, and his hand went to the familiar shelf. He took down a bottle, uncorked it, and sniffed at the neck. Not the right one, so he felt for another. This too was not the one, and as his mother drew near and plucked at his sleeve, his rage exploded upon both women—they were in the plot together! He seized plates and glasses on the sideboard and hurled them in his fury across the room, and his stick whirled terribly round.

Germaine fled, leading little Désiré by the hand. He was crying—his face cut by a flying piece of china that had luckily just missed the eye. When overtaken by Gandolphe she poured out her rebellion in sobs and exclamations. She would not go back to such a man!

He let the first gush of her bitterness exhaust itself. Then he said, gently:

"You must admit that he has some right to be exasperated." Skilfully he questioned her:

"And your mother-in-law—what does she do?"

"She resists him."

"There are two of you then."

Germaine sighed: "Two enemies."

"That's your fault." He hinted what help they would be able to give each other—they who were both intent on almost the same end. But to begin with they must give up their family feud.

"It's she! It's she!"

"Perhaps that'll alter!"

He went back with her to the door. The house was wrapped again in deep silence. Germaine had forgotten her key, and rang the bell. The old woman opened the door and instantly put the anxious question—"The little one?"

"Well, what of him?"

"Nothing serious?"

"No, but if it had been a centimetre higher——!"

"My God!" With her eyes full of tears, the grandmother took the child in her arms. When she had seen him running away with his face bleeding, she had believed his eye was struck.

"And I shouted it at Joseph, that,—that he'd knocked his eye out, and it was same as if he'd been felled with a club. He stopped all of a sudden: 'No! Say it isn't true!' 'Yes it is, and his mother's just taken him to the chemist!' He fell on to a chair, quite sober, saying he was a

brute, a brute, but also that it was all too miserable, and he'd chuck himself into the water."

What a frenzy it was that actuated all these melancholy creatures!

The old woman turned to Gandolphe:

"When he hasn't been drinking," she sighed, "he's not so bad——"

"No one's bad," said the sergeant.

He kept them both there, for quite a long time, on the doorstep. The moon was rising, and the serene glow was scattering the gathered darkness. They could hear the drone of an aeroplane and see the shafts of light from a new intermittent lamp which the aviator was trying. Patient and gentle as an apostle, Gandolphe was holding forth on forgiveness and good-will.

Almost opposite them, a big patch of blackness in the row of houses bore silent witness that one of them was destroyed last year by a 380mm. shell. To leeward of death, poor human beings should help and support each other. People were never so low that they could not build again a temple in which to shelter their reasons for existence. What was the sum of their trouble? The son, the husband—cruelly struck down? But as long as breath remained in the human being—! Some way would be found whereby this man could earn his living and bring up his children decently.

"That's so, little one?" The sergeant's hand was stroking the head of the pensive little boy—for whose sake, he said, they must be of enduring

courage, and then—even if the world of today crumbled in ruin—hope could live upon a morrow blossoming with happiness.

The two women listened to him in silence, subdued by his words. And perhaps the line of his argument attracted them less than his gestures, less than his serious and musical voice. In the end he took hold of a hand of each of them, and joined them on the child's head:

"*You* are the mother and grandmother. *You* are the wife and mother. In that way you are bound together."

They offered no resistance. It was a treaty of sacred reconciliation, a covenant of union.

On his way back to describe the scene to Jean, Gandolphe felt his heart bathed in that gladness which is the good man's due. Looking up to the peaceful sky, he fortified himself in the hope that if he still worked for the general happiness, he would ensure his own.

BOOK X

CHAPTER I

THE TASK OF LIFE

Two weeks more had gone by, and Andrée had sent no reply.

Jean lived in a sort of sentimental torpor. There was no acute suffering—only the feeling of a sleeping pain that was ready to awake again as soon as he questioned his heart. But he no longer ventured on that game, and he took it kindly of Gandolphe that he abstained from all intrusive inquiries.

The "transit" continued to run smoothly. Assuredly, the sergeant knew how to go about it. When for eight whole days his team had had nothing but galvanized iron to handle, iron and still more iron, and the monotony of the task was giving rise to some slackness, Gandolphe took it into his head to find out the destination of their daily consignments. The trucks, for instance, were labelled "Moreuil."

Where was that spot? He made inquiries. Ah, in the Somme valley, quite near the line of

fire! Might not their daily effort be of immediate benefit to the offensive?

An adjutant of convoy confirmed the supposition. All those materials were hardly unshipped there before they were forthwith transported to the second line, where they were used to build strong temporary shelters for that line of artillery that was inexorably advancing and forcing the enemy to retreat.

As soon as they knew this, the ardour of our friends was roused to the point of rivalry. You could see the men with wheel-barrows break into races between them. The loaders, gathered in groups of four or six, seized the sheets of iron; "one, two—up!" Laughing, they nimbly lifted them up to the waggons, where three pals had the job of arranging them.

As Chasles passed on his bicycle, Gandolphe cried: "You've got some boys here, lieutenant!"

The civilians entered into competition; and for three days following things went with such a vim that the *Dartmoor* was at the quayside twenty-four hours less than usual.

"They're playing you a dirty trick, eh?" the attaché said laughingly to Clawson, the English captain, who used to profit in his own way by the intervals of waiting at Dunkerque.

"I'm satisfied!" Clawson retorted: "Those things come after duty!"

Chasles asked the sergeant to call his fifty workers together when the whistle went:

"My lads, I feel obliged to offer you my personal thanks, along with the brigadier's. It's a saving of ten thousand francs; and our comrades on the Somme will be able to protect themselves quicker. You are possibly reducing their casualties, simply by this day that you have gained.

Poitou murmured: "It'd be top-hole, eh, to gain two of 'em!"

Gandolphe was tapping Jean's shoulder: "Well? Is the Dubus system swamped?"

"Yes," Darboise admitted: "Here, the result's marvellous—thanks to you! Unfortunately, men like you are so rare!"

"Plenty of men are doing their duty."

"Hum! Look where we are in the war!" Jean had obviously renewed his relations with Decante of late.

"I don't pretend," replied the other, "that we might not have done better; but look where we were when we started!"

He recalled the beginnings of the war. Our inferiority!—worse than in 1870. And yet, after five weeks—the Marne'

"But since then?"

"Well?"

"The blunders committed!"

"No doubt—they're always the most obvious in times of recoil. But also, to be fair, what powers have been revealed! I'm not speaking only of courage, in which we want nothing from any nation, but qualities of organisation, that

brain-power which some people foolishly claim as a monopoly for our enemies."

The sergeant set up the striking picture of the political, economic, and diplomatic difficulties among which our leaders had unceasingly moved. And now, after twenty-six months, were we not beginning, slowly but surely—thanks to energy, work, and even to method, it must be acknowledged—to get the mastery in all points over those great experts in method?

"Mastery?"

"Exactly." Gandolphe spoke under the sway of that justifiable enthusiasm which filled French hearts at the beginning of October, 1916. What were the diplomatists on the other side saying about Roumania's sortie from neutrality and the repression of the plots in Greece? Our mastery in the air, too, was now definite; and the fruits of our effort on the Somme were ripening rapidly. The day after the taking of Combles, what consternation showed itself in the German communiqués!

"Did all that get done by itself? To get going and to focus so many incongruous elements, how many masters of all the branches of human activity must have arisen—builders and scientists, directors and strategy! Come now, what country like ours, where our improvisation counterbalanced the labours of forty years? Our race has all the gifts! The battle of the Marne was a victory for intuition and genius. Our present successes are prodigies of industry and talent."

"You speak in vain!" said Jean. "When I look at our military men—bah! Even here there are plenty who've done themselves well out of it!"

"Here?"

"In just this work that's going on round about us, can you tell me where the mind and intelligence come in?"

Gandolphe quoted a simple fact. The Depot of Dunkerque was the most important in France right up to a time not long gone by. During the great battles in Artois, it happened that the bakery had to supply 500,000 rations at once on the merest warning:

"They have never once failed the army—the goods have always been sent off to time. Don't you think it was necessary for Morinet to be a strict man?"

"Considering what he is, it's possible!"

"And Deludat. Although he's no good at spelling, he's very conscientious in his work!"

"A brute—don't mention him!"

"'Brute' is soon said. I was talking about him lately to Trubert, his orderly, and he assured me that he's 'not a bad sort,' at bottom!"

"Still your famous theory?"

"More than ever!"

They fell to arguing. Jean went on to the war-path against this obdurate optimism. No, really, he couldn't have it; he remembered too many monstrously dirty tricks, too many deplorable mistakes. Look at the potatoes allowed to start

sprouting, the sacks allowed to rot. And at the bakery only, look at the shortage of mechanical kneaders. What about the incessant scandals of the "wood fatigue?" Oh yes; they were getting along! Néraudin ought to be promoted!

Gandolphe advanced his arguments. Did they know everything? Those potatoes—as long as he had mentioned them,—had he any idea that it was in Holland, not at Rouen, where they had gone bad on the quays, through the default of ship-owners who had guaranteed the transport? Out of date, was it, the procedure at the bakery? All the more reason to admire it for having done what it was called on to do! And even there, there were actually beneficial transformations going on, planned by Adjutant Thomeray, a quiet chap, who did less shouting than work. The brigadier? One had a right not to care for his character, but he was an astonishing worker! Chasles, who saw him on the job, didn't spare his enthusiasm!

Jean thought it expedient to smile, and say: "I don't insist. You'll end by defending Dubus at last!"

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Dubus! A few days later, when Darboise had climbed on to a rick during the period of their snack, he saw this Dubus walking among some piles of logs and making his way to the next yard. At sight of him Darboise made a fierce grimace—the only being who got no forgiveness even at the

indulgent hands of the sergeant; and he thought spitefully how many more there were like him!

As usual, the adjutant was closely followed by his dog. Jean thought he could see that the animal was limping,—yes, he was.

“Athos!” his master called.

The dog came up, and Dubus, sitting on a heap of planks, took and examined the trailing foot.

A thorn! The adjutant took a needle from his purse and “purified” it in the flame of a match.

How was he going to set about it? Darboise expected to see the dog resist. He even counted on seeing him—and he would have given five francs to see it—plant his teeth in his ugly master’s thigh. But the adjutant was still caressing the silky paw that was covered with tawny hair.

What tenderness he showed, the brutal Dubus, in touching that quivering flesh without inflicting further pain! His face had assumed a quite uncommon expression of sympathy, and he was whistling, as if to divert the poor beast, which made little starts and trembled from head to foot.

At last, when the little splinter came away on the fine point, he lifted the paw to his lips in a furtive movement. Athos drew it back quickly and put it somewhat timorously on the ground. He took a few hesitating steps, and then came back wagging his tail. His big handsome head was then fervently rubbed against the knees of his master, who stroked him affectionately.

What a flood of thought came over Jean! He

remembered a few facts he had gleaned about Dubus—that he had been divorced a long time and was alone in the world, except for his dog's society. He loved that animal, at least. Love!—the power of that incomparable word! In that love he was tied to the human family; in him too there was a fund of kindness; even in him there was something to build upon! And this was the only being whom Gandolphe would not defend! What about the others, then? In every soul there was a spark to set flashing! *That* was the Task!

CHAPTER II

THE WIND OF FORTUNE

TRUE Jean regretted the former freshness of his heart, the delirium of high spirits and hope in which he began life. True, he saw in the persistence of the war a cause of mourning and gloom to every generous heart. And he in no way hid from himself the secondary motive of his sadness. Never mind, great progress was made! The desire to do away with himself no longer passed through his mind except as a silly notion—since death was the only evil, and life the source of all good things!

Gandolphe's society and their multiplied conversations had developed manly maturity in him. He was no more the flippant young man of not long ago. He had realised the obligations that lay on him since he was of those who would survive. Rallying to Socialist teachings, he felt the need of grasping its principles. The sergeant borrowed books for him out of the municipal library, and heread the great forerunners Jean-Jacques, Leroux, Proud'hon, Louis Blanc. He read Karl Marx, logician and doctrinaire. He read Jaurés, singer and apostle.

And one saw him, like Gandolphe his master, striving hard, almost before his conversion, to avoid sectarianism and dilute his judgment with a little human charity, to apply those lowly moral principles whose sovereign power the sergeant had revealed to him.

The first results were not long in appearing. Delight was theirs, in the modest sphere which had fallen to them, on the day when Lavigne returned from leave and declared that they had found him at home a changed man!

“And I showed my notes on the Dispensary to my brother-in-law. Very interested—I thought he would be. He wrote at once to the mayor here and to Quinton.”

And now, sooner than one would have believed certain hopes were being confirmed in the matter of Germaine's husband, who, since the night of the great scene, had grown wiser. The devotion of the two women, at last united, discovered him grateful. Gandolphe, returning to the charge, succeeded in overawing him by his earnest words. And the man did not seem very far from agreeing to an attempt at learning another trade—“if only to astonish the neighbours, who'd thought him a poor old good-for-nothing!”

Jean was able to claim the credit for a—happy idea. Under some pretext or other he took the excellent Doguet to the Rue Jules Ferry and arranged for him to meet Madame Mafranc.

They both let themselves go at length on their

troubles, and each had words of sympathy for the other. Jean kept himself in readiness to sound them in detail, and the woman's turn came first. Why shouldn't she divorce her man? The woman cried, "What should I do then?" "Get married again, of course!" "But what man'll saddle himself with me and my four kiddies?"

Doguet, himself a sly-boots, saw at once how the cat was jumping. He acknowledged that—what he was after—was really a better-class woman—such as he had in mind. Only it was obvious that it shocked both of them to be talking about marriage while the husband was still alive.

Now it happened about this time that Mafranc, as he passed one evening under the railway bridge, conceived the idiotic idea of insulting the Customs officer on duty. He was instantly arrested and locked up; and the second day was seized with congestion of the lungs. Undermined by his vice, he sank rapidly when carried to the hospital. But he remained finally obnoxious, and refused with curses to see his wife and children.

Jean had re-discovered his passionate devotion to his art—an excellent thing for him. On Gandolphe's advice, he began again to take his sketch-book to the yard, and in moments of respite his comrades contended with each other for the honour of passing before his pencil. One afternoon the attaché came up very quietly and watched him at work on a bigger subject, a scene with ten figures in it of surprising movement and life.

Chasles only made his presence known when the sketch was finished:

"Splendid! Lend me that—I want to take it to the Bureau!"

The next day, he sent for Jean: "A wild success, your bit of work!"

"Really?"

"I showed it round the mess. The brigadier wants to make your acquaintance."

Jean made a grimace; but the invitation was the same thing as a command.

Néraudin, when Jean appeared, received him affably:

"Ah, you're an artist? That's obvious! There's the 'touch' in the work of yours they've shown me."

A proposition followed:

"Would you like to be relieved from your fatigue for a few days—to make me a few sketches according to my requirements? Does that suit you?"

Did it suit him! Two delightful weeks followed, in which he went every day with his slender implements into the most picturesque corners of the Port. And his drawings had the good luck to please. His high employer papered his room with them in delight:

"The collection will be useful to me to explain my responsibilities, eh, every time a general or supervisor comes round. When you get any other ideas, let me know. I'll give the order that you have the afternoon free."

Such relations with high places were not long

in earning special respect for Jean. Not on the part of the captain or of Fauvel, who were not aware of them; but at least on the part of his comrades and non-coms, and of Corporal Valentin, who came one fine day to beg Jean to "do his head" for his fiancée.

Darboise did it. Whereupon the corporal, in a burst of confidence, showed him some of the girl's letters, quite touching in their tale of an ingenuous and devoted passion. She was servant at an inn, and penniless, but they had a baby, and he should marry her for that reason. He also, a better chap than one would have thought!

From day to day, Jean showed his sketches to his two friends. Certain remarks passed on them by Lavigne struck Jean as legitimate. Did not the sergeant notice, in his friend's technique, something of Claude Boucheron's method?

"Ah, he was my master!" said Jean, and it was the first time the great artist's name had been mentioned between them.

The discovery was strange, and Lavigne was wonder-struck. Claude Boucheron was a cousin of his! Better than that, it was his own father who had sheltered and assisted him when, at the beginning of his career, the artist had reached Paris, poor and without influence, and reduced to giving lessons on the mandolin!

"We still have at home some of his work of that period—work unknown to the world, but even then wonderful! You shall see it!"

It was also through Lavigne that Jean got details of the reasons why Chinard's drawings had not appeared now for six weeks in the *Quotidien*. At the end of September there had been a scandal—Paulette Dartigues with a comedian of the Boulevard Theatre surprised by the regular lord and master. And Letourneur had resolved on a definite breakaway. Now, being a crafty financier, he had been careful for years past to have all bills made out in his name, and he paid them. In a very short time, then, the actress had been shown the door of her house; the favourite's favourites were swept away in the same hurricane, Chinard at their head. How had he gone on since? Not an echo of him, nor a word in the papers. His exhibition at the Devambez Gallery had had to be countermanded.

At first Darboise felt himself revenged; then, too much revenged, for a fellow like Chinard, deprived of real resources, was capable of doing foolish things.

It was a singular veering of the wind of fortune that made it now blow on Jean. Gandolphe had had the idea of submitting some of Jean's best sketches to his celebrated friend in Paris, whose name he had heard—Maupeou, manager of the *Revue Moderne*. By return of post he had replied: "Your young friend has a lot of talent! I shall be only too pleased to take something from him. Let me know his terms."

Jean felt as if he were dreaming. He had but to

sign two drawings, and a few days later a cheque reached him. Two pages were given him in the next number of the *Revue*, and Maupeou, in the course of several cordial letters, demanded more drawings.

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Jean decided then to build new plans for the future. He would go forward—it was worth while—into a career which appeared to have so auspicious a beginning, not disdaining wealth and fame, but even seeking them, if only that one day Some One should regret having severed their lives. And then, what could one not do, with money? He would know the happiness of letting his soul expand, of cultivating himself—a free and spacious life, and travel, too! And so much good to accomplish!

And already the chances of sowing the good seed appeared automatically in his path.

Cazenave first, who had avoided him of late. But Jean overtook him one fine day and began to talk to him in the same old friendly way. And the other confessed his worries—Gabrielle, his fair little shop-girl friend in the Grand Bazaar at F——, enceinte! Her mother was writing to his and threatening them with the thunders of both civil and military justice:

“You can imagine a complaint coming here! And I can’t do anything!”

“What’s she like?” asked Jean, after a silence.

"As nice as she can be, and well brought up. And she was a good girl till she knew me!"

"Why shouldn't you marry her?"

The little Bordelais uttered an exclamation: "Marry!" Why the devil hadn't he thought of that! And then he fell upon reflection:

"Sure enough that would put everything right!"

Another day Darboise met Véchaud, poor little Véchaud, whom he hadn't seen for weeks. He had just left the hospital, and any one could read discouragement in his crestfallen face.

"Hullo! What's the matter?"

Véchaud let loose the litany of his customary lamentation. Then he emptied the knapsack of his heart down to the bottom. The great fear that was worrying him was that his future might be compromised.

"Why?"

His place as clerk of a *sous-préfecture* had been taken. A wounded and discharged soldier had been in his chair at Mortagne for six months; and when he, Véchaud, went back, were they going to chuck the unlucky man out? Never; it would be an injustice, anyway. There was a chance then that it might be he who would find himself on the pavement, with no references—a pitiful auxiliary, atoning for the crime of not having been under fire:

"So,—haven't you heard? Well, I'm going to make a request, and there'll be a recommendation behind it——"

"A request for what?"

"To get into the Flying Corps."

Darboise looked at the small and ungainly figure, with its little formal movements of the minor official:

"Don't do that silly thing, my lad."

"Why a silly thing?"

"Because you're made for an aviator—as much as I'm made for a Pope."

"One begins as an observer."

"You're no more fit for observer than pilot. You're an office man. Stick to your job. It would be too stupid to go and get yourself killed without the least advantage to any one, when the war's already lasted two years and when there'll be so many of your sort missing when peace is declared!"

But Véchaud spoke still, with bowed head, of his ruined career. Here was another poor man in peril! Jean recalled that August morning when Gandolphe's reproach had scattered his own frenzy—"You are alive, your four limbs are intact. God! Why, the future is in your hands!"

So he showed Véchaud in a clear light the re-blossoming of the world tomorrow, the revenge they would take from destiny, the success that was certain to men of good intent. Why limit his ambitions to the poor living of an office stool? Why not use this chance of escaping from it, on the contrary, and try his luck in larger spheres?

Jean exhorted him to such purpose that the other seemed disposed to put off his project:

"Ah, if we saw each other oftener!"

"Why, come then, tonight. I've some friends who'll be delighted to know you."

He told Gandolphe, who approved warmly; still another to be rescued! To begin with, one might find a way of getting his job changed; he would have to speak to the mayor about it.

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Jean's rapid glance skimmed the black-edged card, and he started:

"We regret to inform you of the sad loss we have sustained in the death of Madame Thérèse-Louise Chinard, née Travers."

Chinard's mother! He saw her again in her grey cap, but still young in spirit, her son's true friend and indeed his only one. When they all used to dine together, dessert would find her merrily lighting a cigarette, while the sallies she threw into the chatter yielded in assurance to no one's.

Who would have dreamed she was ill? Jean had just once heard mention of some affection of the heart—and now she had gone! Darboise recalled particularly, that April morning, the day of his departure for Dunkerque, when Andrée and he went to the Chinards' in the Rue Franklin. Who would have thought that but six months later one so full of life——!

And he put things together like this: an affection of the heart, and the shock of her son's recent reverse—it was possible. He thought of the blow it would be to his old comrade, alone, overwhelmed, sobbing—she was so much to him. Jean was sincerely compassionate. He was gratefully touched, too, by the sending of that card, which seemed like an invitation to renew their ties of yore.

Ah, Jean knew it now, that pleasure Gandolphe so often talked about, of making the first advance with proffered hand to those who have hurt you. That same evening he wrote a long and affectionate letter to Chinard, and four days later a touching epistle came to him in response.

CHAPTER III

JEAN'S PLEA FOR HIS FRIEND

"WHAT about your leave, now?"

"I'm not taking it."

"A mistake, perhaps."

As Jean was silent, the sergeant tried to raise bright and encouraging visions for him. Darboise broke in: "It's futile. You're a witness that I've tried everything."

He spoke deliberately. He recalled the series of overtures which had every time been checked. The sergeant was wrong about his wife. Her attachment to him was only a trifling sentiment:

"She loves you!"

"More's the pity. I love her no longer. Literally, she has become a matter of indifference to me," he insisted.

"And—your child?"

"For his sake only, I cannot forget the mother, nor forgive her. To leave me without word of my son, as if I were a lost father, it's—scandalous. I shall take it to law—as soon as the war is over—perhaps before. I shall require that the custody of the child is shared."

His tone sounded disguised, and Gandolphe shook his head:

"I tell you that you still love her."

"This time you're wrong, my friend."

Darboise's voice and gesture had suddenly become strong and decided:

"No—I've crossed her out of my future. Fortunately, you've made me see reasons for living, other than—than—one's home. I'm going to inscribe myself as an ordinary and industrious workman in the great cause. That's how I'll furnish my life!" He smiled: "Mark what I say!"

And Gandolphe wondered if this attitude of detachment concealed real serenity or the most heartbroken despair.

.

But Jean was still moved by the affectionate importunity of the friend who never left a stone unturned to clear the way for him. On his advice, too, Trousselier had just entered his name for admission to the "re-education" school at Caen.

Darboise was worried by a remorseful doubt whether *he* was discharging his debt! Their visits to the d'Estignards had been resumed and become regular. They lunched at the villa every Sunday. In such conditions, ought he to be discouraged at the first mishap? Jean recalled the old man's confidences and the young lady's

words. As for his friend's feelings, he had not the slightest doubt. Perhaps they had both placed some sort of hope in him!

One day, observing that Gandolphe was pensive, he said, point-blank:

"What do you think of my cousin Sylvaine?"

"That she's—accomplished."

"To the extent—that you would like to share your life with her?"

"As long as you know it—!" murmured the sergeant.

"I was waiting—for you to speak to me about her."

"And I—I imagined that you were avoiding the subject."

"What reason could I have had?"

"Thinking that I should do better to dismiss such ideas!"

"Listen," said Jean, who had an obscure feeling of penitence, "I can't say that I'm positively certain yet, but I shouldn't be at all surprised——"

He narrated in detail the conversations of the past month, and Gandolphe drank in his words:

"But she—*she*? It's *her* opinion—that counts——"

"She? I can answer for her sympathy, and better, for her admiration of you."

Darboise did not fear they were making no progress. He remembered that discussion last Sunday at Malo when the question was raised of

the recovery of France after the trials of the moment. The sergeant had warmed up as he glorified that work of the future which would redeem the present. His eyes shone with faith and hope—how fine he was! He seemed to lead the d'Estignards on and almost rally them to his arguments. Sylvaine especially had seemed moved by his eloquence, perhaps to the point of realising that such moral greatness in the balance made up for all.

Jean added:

"Old man, there's a way to settle it. Ask her—that's all. Will you agree for me to take it on?"

"I'm afraid—it's so much to me. You see, this—this feeling—it's got me—so profoundly. I beg you—it would be better—to wait a little while yet—until my—until my position is decided."

"Your position?" Jean asked in surprise.

The sergeant explained. A notice had lately appeared. The "auxiliaries for eyesight" must be re-examined by specialists, the regulations affecting them having been modified.

"But I thought you were in the Auxiliary for emphysema?"

"My squad-book says, 'For eyesight.'"

"Do you think you'll really be passed for the armed service?"

"I know that Fauvel would like nothing so much."

Darboise shrugged his shoulders:

"No; I can't see 'em sending you into the trenches, with your breathing and eyesight, and at your age,—forty-one?"

The sergeant blushed: "Forty-two."

Jean had willingly promised him to postpone his overtures. But in his brotherly impatience, and without telling Gandolphe, he took the tram to Malo the very next day. When Sylvaine joined him in the drawing-room:

"Alone?" he said.

"And you too, alone?"

"More's the pity, eh?"

"Delighted to see you——"

"Wouldn't you rather there were two of us?"

"Why should I?"

She raised her eyes to his, and it disconcerted him to see in them what he took for a reflection of that obscure distress which he had missed in them for some time now. They exchanged a few sentences, and then the conversation languished; a bad start, he thought. But as long as he had come on purpose— Besides, why, she must more than once have searched her own heart, and no doubt she had reached a decision!

Boldly Jean broached his subject. He knew a good fellow, a man with a noble heart, who had long since fallen passionately in love with her. She knew to whom he was referring. Would she give her assent——?

Sylvaine remained silent. When he repeated the question:

"It's not the right day," she said.

"How's that?" he asked; and then, inclined to take offence, "Don't jest!" he cried.

"I assure you, this is not the right day——"

"Sylvaine, if he were here himself; if he were imploring you—today—to give him your answer, would it be yes or no?"

"Today? I don't know."

"Seriously?"

"Today, I say."

Jean got impatient. Did it mean a contemplated refusal, or was it merely feminine coquettishness—even in so grave a matter? His mouth hardened as he went on:

"Is that—what I must tell him?"

"Certainly."

The young girl's face had become clouded, and reserved; and just then Jean was amazed by her likeness to Andrée—to Andrée as he pictured her today.

"In short, then, it's—no?"

"If you like."

There was nothing to do but go. Madame d'Estignard met him and tried in vain to make him stay. She went with him to the door:

"Come again soon," she said, "with M. Gandolphe. You're the only two who distract Sylvaine. In these days, with——"

"Yes? With——?"

"The ideas that she's getting again!"

"What ideas?"

"It's the time, you know, two years ago—when she stopped getting letters from her fiancé. And today—it's the anniversary, you understand,—of the news."

Jean departed. He regretted the tragic coincidence and his abortive errand; but after all it was doubtless better not to have been incited to slender hopes. He had felt that love was wanting in the girl's heart—such love as his friend deserved!

His first thought was to give an account to Gandolphe without waiting an hour. Then when he met him face to face he dared not inflict on him the shock of his disappointment. And during the week which followed the sergeant hardly left him, as though he were watching him to find out exactly when he was going to carry out his commission.

.

That evening Darboise was in a hurry to see Gandolphe again and question him. The afternoon's affair was running in his mind, and Caze-nave had come to the Port to find the sergeant, who was wanted at the Bureau to sign something!

Without even going home first, Jean called at his friend's in the Rue Jean Bart and found him out. Going home again to the Rue Jules Ferry, he was joined by Gandolphe. The sergeant was greatly agitated, and cried:

"Something's happened!"

"What?"

"My two babies, my little ones——"

The sergeant held out a telegram covered with stamps and obliterations. Jean picked out the writing aloud:

"Old civilian called Jules Lefebvre evacuated Zürich October 15 with little boy and girl might be children of Gandolphe professor Arras please advise father immediately."

The signature which followed was that of the French Consul at Zürich. As the telegram had been bandied about at the Foreign Office, at G. H. Q., and at the Depot, a letter of explanation had had time to overtake it, and by a strange coincidence was delivered by the same mail. The sergeant drew from the envelope a photograph that bore the seal of the Red Cross:

"It's they," he said: "Look."

His hand and his voice were trembling. In spite of their ailing looks, the childish faces displayed the resemblance to their father in their decided chins and prominent foreheads. In astonishment Jean said:

"*Your* likeness! What are you going to do?"

"I'm starting this evening. The captain has just signed my leave-paper."

"He made no difficulty about it?"

"Yes, he did—and advised me not to risk the overstaying trick."

Darboise shrugged his shoulders. Was it possible not to dislike these people?

"And where do you expect to meet them?"

"Read. They'll bring them as far as the frontier."

Jean went on: "Ah, those little ones that you have mourned for!"

"It's timely that they're restored to me!"

The same thought must have crossed both their minds. The sergeant added:

"This changes everything."

"How—everything?" Darboise was pretending not to understand.

"All—my plans." Gandolphe cleared his throat: "Those things, you know—that we were outlining, the other night." And as Jean nodded his head, he went on:

"Yes. It's no longer worth while—I've considered it—to worry that girl. A widower of my age, with two children already—I shall have enough to do to bring them up. Besides——"

His voice fell: "Besides, even without that, I don't know—I can't think—that it would have come off——"

Darboise wanted to protest, but could not get a word out. Then, with an obvious effort, Gandolphe said:

"You went, didn't you—to Malo?"

"To Malo?"

"Yes—a week ago. Tell me—what they said to you. I can stand it—now." His hand closed tightly on the photograph: "Now that I have this compensation!"

Jean saw through the outrageous fib. He recounted the late scene, hiding nothing of the truth, but only glossing it over, and emphasised that he had got no definite reply, that Sylvaine was apparently holding herself back for further thought.

"Yes, yes." Gandolphe sighed: "What would have become of me, I wonder, if they had not been restored to me!"

Smiling, he tried to caress the delicate twin picture; but such a heart-broken look showed in his features that Jean was seized with compassion. His friend, that loftier soul, deprived of the consolation that the sweetness of a loving face provides! Both of them smitten alike! Ah, how evilly the world was made!

Darboise went with the sergeant to the station, and they walked side by side. The autumnal twilight was dappling the sky above the grey houses with mauve and violet. They exchanged a few random sentences. When did Gandolphe expect to arrive at Bellegarde? The morning of the next day but one, at the earliest. What was he going to do with the children? Probably entrust them to a cousin who lived at Le Mans. But mightn't he ask to be with them again himself? Wasn't it his legal right, after so many months passed in the war zone? Yes, unless the coming Commission put him back into the armed service."

Suddenly the sergeant said:

"Ah, forgive me! I forgot to tell you of a

letter I've had from Maupeou. He wants to know if you're contented at Dunkerque; and desires me to tell you that, if required, he would pledge himself to get you sent back."

"I only want to be where you are."

Both were clinging in their sorrow to their friendship, the only profit, in sum, of their three months' endeavours. Stoically, they tried to comfort themselves with the balance-sheet of the profit they had made for others. A letter had arrived the day before from Caen, where the blind man was gleefully congratulating himself on the progress he was recording in the art of making up horsehair. Lavigne had read them a note from his brother-in-law, who was getting ready to travel to Paris to confer with Quinton in the matter of a dispensary. Mafranc had left the hospital. Though dumbfounded to hear of his wife's action against him for divorce, he seemed disposed not to dispute it.

As they drew near the station, where the train from Paris had just come in, they met the flying exodus of newsboys:

"Great Victory at Verdun!"

Verdun! Jean bought a paper, which bore, as its second head-line: "Douaumont and Vaux Retaken in a Day."

"Come now! They *shan't* have them!"

"Perhaps it's the beginning of better days!"

And thus they exhorted each other. The end of the nightmare appearing, a new dawn on the

point of breaking, a noble work awaiting them—to pave a way for humanity towards a better era. Alas! At that moment they were like old lovers repeating to each other the vows in which they had ceased to believe, like poets who no longer hail themselves as geniuses. What a thing remote was the happiness of mankind when their own was becoming a chimera! They were only lukewarm tasks now offered to their high-minded enthusiasm. Resignation is wisdom's saddest victory!

.

Fate has unforeseen caprices! While his friend was away, Jean received an invitation for them both to dine at Malo. He sent back a note excusing himself. But M. d'Estignard turned up in person and insisted: Dr. Alquier was going to be there.

Jean's hand was forced, and he went. Fortunately the surgeon was in animated vein and helped the evening on by talking and telling a hundred stories. Darboise was silent; over him and Sylvaine hovered the bitter memory of their recent conversation. But when questioned on the subject of Gandolphe he had no option but to repeat the story he had already told his host the day before, the miracle of the children found again.

“What times we live in!”

The surgeon confirmed it that the sergeant had now the right to leave the war zone.

"Unless the Commission plays a trick on him," said Jean.

"What,—is he going for re-examination?"

"Yes."

"Bah! They're not so hard on the old 'uns as that!"

Darboise found the expression annoying, for Sylvaine was close to him. She had seemed lost in a dream since the beginning of the meal.

When the coffee was served, Sylvaine led him aside to a corner of the verandah:

"Cousin,—you spoke to me the other day—I hardly know what I answered; I've thought about it since. Your friend——"

Darboise, disquieted, repeated:

"My friend Gandolphe——?"

"If it's he,—if you think he may be still in the same mind——"

As much moved as if the revelation had concerned himself, Jean stammered:

"Sylvaine, before he went away he told me that he'd given up hope; how he saw clearly and especially that with such domestic responsibility——"

"The children?"

"Yes."

"It's because of them—or rather, it's the thought of them that has made me decide."

Under the tall palm-tree that drooped in mourning for the absent sun, with her pure and candid eyes fixed on Jean, Sylvaine opened her

heart. Since the day before, since her father had brought the news, she had reached the crisis; and determination had sprung from her search into her conscience. Her road was there, traced plainly before her, and she would choose it—rather than the mournful lot, the restricted life of the old maid! Surely, since it was in her power to help to rebuild a home and restore a little happiness to three severely stricken people! Besides, she assured him, she would be very proud of the task which awaited her as the associate of a man like that in the work of regeneration!

.

The sergeant's first words, when he got back, rejected his good fortune:

"My poor old fellow, you're dreaming!"

When Darboise had repeated word for word what Sylvaine had said——

"Too great a sacrifice! I can't accept that," the sergeant said.

"And *I* tell you that she's waiting for you."

In his flurry, the other renewed his scruples:

"Before I went there, I would rather have been before this Commission. If, by chance, I had to go away——"

"Do you think that would make any difference?"

The very next day Jean took him to Malo.

At the villa, they found Sylvaine alone. She did away at once with all embarrassment by saying:

"It's 'yes,' and she offered her hand to the sergeant.

"And—your parents?" he asked.

"They're willing."

In a mutual pressure of the hand they were bound to each other. Serious and tender, Sylvaine immediately asked what must be done with—with "our children."

"It's like a dream," Gandolphe murmured.

The feeling that Darboise had, as the tears came into his eyes, was something like happiness; but suddenly he compared the scene with another in which *he* had played a part, and they were tears of bitterness which escaped him.

At night, just as Gandolphe was leaving Jean, he said:

"I shall do the same for you."

As Jean shook his head, with an air of sadness and misgiving, the sergeant repeated:

"Yes, yes, I shall. I shall do the same for you, I promise you."

CHAPTER IV

A DISASTER

THE days which followed were marked by a return of the Taubes. When they had finished their hellish rounds, there were twenty-seven dead and a hundred and three wounded.

CHAPTER V

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

GRINDING under the brakes, the train slowed down and entered the station. On the platform were two non-coms., scanning the faces at the windows.

"I see her—in front, in front!"

Gandolphe did not know her; he had recognised her only by a certain likeness. They hastened to the front of the train.

Andrée had already got out, with her little yellow valise in her hand. There was no need of introduction. As soon as she saw Lavigne:

"Well?" she said to the two men. Her voice faltered, and anguish was written on her face.

"Alive? Alive?" She felt her legs giving way under her, and feared that she would fall.

"Living? So much—yes."

"A bomb?" she breathed.

"A bomb."

"My God!"

As they approached the exit, Lavigne timidly asked her what papers she had.

"A permit from the Chief of Police. That's

all. On the way I had only to show this telegram."

She showed it to them, all creased and crushed by the fevered hand which did not let it go all night.

They went out, and Lavigne left them to resume his duties. No tram was waiting in the station square.

"Shall we wait? Or walk?" Gandolphe asked.

"Walk!"

They went towards the steps which open on to the Mardyck road.

"Will he—know me?"

"I hope so."

For a long time, those were the only words exchanged.

She walked at a pace which the sergeant could hardly maintain. One would have said that she was under hypnotic influence, with her irregular step, her staring eyes, and bloodless lips. And indeed she had had only a half-mechanical knowledge of herself since the thunderbolt of the night before—when that telegram came.

Though she had only just glanced at it, she had barely the strength left to offer it to her mother, and straightway fell into an armchair; for the text was appallingly laconic:

"Your husband wounded in danger asking for you—Gandolphe."

In a flash she had pictured the agony of the life yonder under the constant menace of air-raids.

To think that, a week ago, a little paragraph headed "A Zeppelin at Dunkerque" had impressed her so much that she had begun to write the answer to Jean which was several weeks overdue! But having made out a rough draft, she had let it lie, counting on resuming it some day soon!

And during the delay due to caprice, *this* had happened!

Her hasty departure and the fourteen hours in the train had left only a confused memory. She had been conscious of neither hunger—she had eaten nothing since the night before—nor fatigue. All her mind was concentrated on the frenzied thought—would she reach him in time?

At the first houses of St. Pol, she questioned her guide:

"Where are we going?"

"To my place."

"Is he—there?"

Gandolphe said: "You'll see him."

She seemed plunged in a nightmare, and nothing made her wonder.

In the middle of the town, when the sergeant turned into the Rue Jean-Bart, she asked:

"Is it far yet?"

"We're there."

Soon he stopped: "It's here."

Andrée looked with expressionless eyes at the little brick house. She thought she could see already the funereal hangings which would be draping the door tomorrow, and the idea was

so painful that she shut her eyes again, and nearly fell.

The sergeant supported her and she rallied again. Behind him she climbed the stairs.

Entering the upper room, her eyes went at once to the bed, where she expected to see the dying man.

"He's not here?"

"Not yet."

"They're going to bring him——?"

"You will see him."

Some minutes went by. Gandolphe had placed a chair for her, and she sank exhausted into it. Oh, the distress of waiting in those unknown lodgings, and the horror of saying to herself: "It's in such surroundings that the news—what news?—will be brought me!"

So depressing Andrée found it that she tried to talk—to brave the sound of her own voice:

"When did it happen?"

"Yesterday—morning."

"Taubes?"

"Taubes."

"He didn't take shelter then?"

"They say that he deliberately exposed himself."

Andrée felt as though a vice was closing on her heart. Instinct told her that this grave and sorrowful soldier knew the whole of their calamity. This, no doubt, was Jean's great friend, of whom he had said so much in his last letter, the trusted messenger who went to Sceaux.

"It's a long time!" she sighed.

Two minutes later, she stood up in feverish impatience:

"Take me there. I must—I want to see him—where he is."

Gandolphe shook his head: "Impossible."

"Why?"

"They wouldn't admit you."

"Is he—is there a hospital?" A thought flashed across her mind:

"An operation—perhaps?"

"May they pull him through!" the sergeant murmured.

She sat down again. In a vision she saw the surgeon's knife in that youthful body which once she had besought Fate so earnestly to preserve to her. This was the second time already that German steel had torn his fragile body. He was once more wounded—and whose was the harshness that had caused it?

Andrée was wrung with remorse, borne down by a conviction that he was going to die. Ah, God! Would he die with rebellion in his heart and his curse on her?

Yet some words in the telegram came back to her memory:

"Is it true that—he asked for me?"

"Quite true."

"He often spoke of me?"

"Of no one but you."

Her emotion was too much for her; and hiding

her face in her hands, such a convulsion of sorrow shook her that Gandolphe at last departed from his frigid attitude. He went and sat by her:

"Alas!" he said gently: "Why didn't you come back to him?"

She could not answer, but her sobs answered for her overpowering regret. He went on:

"Your husband! The father of your child! For a passing mistake! When there is so much trouble in the world, and when he was so penitent!"

He continued, in little sentences that had no savour of the preacher. He told her the simple facts—Jean's despair after she had fled, the follies into which he slid, his "affair" at the Textile, his illness, the mortally imminent risk he had run.

"Since then, I had begun to hope for him again. We were summoning the beautiful and noble things of life; and then—for that was not enough by itself—I tried to persuade him that one day there would be a reconciliation between you, that your bitterness and mistrust would not last for ever—if you loved him. It was on his account, two months ago, that I attempted to see you. I was to send him a wire. What a disappointment he had! And from that time, alas, I've noticed him falling gradually back into that accursed melancholy from which we had saved him once. I've not given up yet. It was on my urgent advice that he wrote that letter again; and he's waited, waited——"

This summary was in effect almost an indictment of her. And yet she would not have dreamed of protesting against it—the sergeant seemed so far from seeking to overwhelm her. He went on; and on the contrary, a sort of serene compassion was evident in his words. Death was the only evil, he repeated. In face of death, let us value life to the utmost, that inestimably good thing,—life, that passing stage that was already too short for love and consolation.

“How true that is!”

Under this hovering flight of death which perhaps was about to pounce on her Jean and tear him away from her, Andrée felt her heart breaking. How paltry her grievances were at this time when mourning swept across the world! Her head fell. What emotion rent her to know how her husband had suffered, that when deprived of her, he had ceased to find the least sweetness in life! How could she have withheld so obstinately the hand of forgiveness? She reddened at the thought. Could she retrieve the wrongs on her side?

“How angry he must be with me!” she said.

“Now and then,” said the sergeant, “it’s true he got stirred up to the point of blasphemy. He declared that his mind was made up, and that he would merely go to law to get——”

She was listening, distracted. He waited a little, and then said:

“Idle words, those! *I* could read his own

heart better than he could; and I read that he loved you too much, that his bitterness was forced, and that as soon as misfortune fell on you——”

“Alas!” she thought aloud: “If only *I* had been wounded instead!”

Some moments of silence followed. Gandolphe went to the window and lifted the blind.

To shake off a haunting and dismal dread, she went on.

“Will you swear it, eh?”

“What?”

“That it’s not—all over?”

“I swear it.”

“Shall we, all the same—go—and inquire?”

“Useless!” he said abruptly, turning away from the window.

“How, useless?”

“Here they are.”

An ascending step was heard on the stair.

With a firmness which overcame her, Gandolphe took her hand and led her into the next room:

“You will wait—here.”

He pulled the door to after him, without closing it quite. She remained standing, her ears strained in stupefaction. What would she hear? Some one knocked, and Gandolphe said:

“Come in!”

And here Andrée believed she was dreaming. She leaned against the frame of the doorway.

“Well, then?” the sergeant had said.

The newcomer’s voice was distorted with

anguish: "I'm starting—what else could I do? With or without leave."

She closed her eyes. That voice—she was as sure as if she had touched him—Jean, her Jean! How could it be possible?

"Show me the telegram," said Gandolphe.

He took it and read it aloud: "Andrée seized appendicitis very serious asking for you come."

Darboise stammered:

"It's her mother that signed it. And if she says 'very serious'—peritonitis, perhaps! She's going to die—Andrée! Andrée!"

"And you're starting?"

"She's *sent* for me!"

"It isn't all quite broken off then?"

"Broken?" Jean cried: "It can't be broken. There's been no one but her in my life. If she—disappeared, I don't know what would become of me. If only I could kiss her and swear to her that—! But what's to be done? If I could get a motor-car as far as Calais——"

Insanity seemed to attack him, and he turned round on the sergeant:

"You may well stand calmly there! You don't know how I loved her——"

"What about her hard-heartedness?"

"I deserved it. I would give twenty years of life to wipe that out! Oh, tell me she will not die!"

He sank into a chair: "Poor little girl—and she thought of me!"

.

And then the unexpected happened. At the sound of the opening door, Jean raised his head. When he saw her coming towards him, he wondered if he were not the sport of illusion. Andrée felt that she must defend her presence; and pale of face, without saying a word, she handed him the telegram she had received.

Jean's eyes flashed over it. He read, he looked at her, he read it again. He put his own into her hands. She understood, and both turned to Gandolphe.

He merely said: "Forgive me if I have hurt you. It was meant for the best."

The sergeant added no more, but went out. Face to face he left them, who still looked at each other with staring eyes as if upon apparitions.

A moment of hesitation followed, when all the forces of evil delivered their last attack. Bitterness was born again. Vexation at their deception, the fear that they had appeared ridiculous, and many other troubles were paralysing the first impulse of instinct. Andrée remembered her reasons for hating this man. She saw again the little portrait of her rival and its outrageous dedication. And he,—in the imminent coldness of her gaze, he thought he could still read obduracy.

No! The recent shock had torn away the protecting armour from the grievances which above all had been built on regard for public opinion. The breath of passion and life, of

irresistible attraction, burst forth as if from the grave. They stood in presence of each other, those two creations of Youth, who, but lately met, had mutually chosen before God and man to unite their destinies and to lavish their happiness on each other. And they were truly that happiness themselves, by their union of body and soul, happiness such as they could never have enjoyed with any other.

Their love shone in their eyes as if it were the only light in the world. How far they were from having any grudge against Gandolphe! Quite otherwise, a twin intuition led them to discern the profound lesson which underlay the ingenious fraud,—just the revelation of what real good and real evil are, the discovered secret of human wisdom, which astonished and enraptured both; him, the student of a few months, her, the tyro of today.

Thus the forces of life drew them mysteriously along. But false pride still delayed the reconciliation in fact. And a minute had gone by. Which should carry it through?

Gandolphe was absent in vain;—it was he again who saved them. For Jean, in spite of all, thanks to his friend's influence, was further along the road of progress than she. "Make the first step," he thought—and remembered. So it was he who went forward and said:

"Andrée!" And with a lover's violence she came the rest of the way

Lip to lip, their breath and their souls mingled, each clasped the other in a convulsive embrace—that other who was a precious part of oneself, the adored one,—in a glowing consciousness of being snatched from death.

CHAPTER VI

WHERE DUTY CALLS

GANDOLPHE reappeared—greeted by a twin look of affection and gratitude. The good fellow applied himself at once to scattering some lingering embarrassment. They had got Madame Darboise there. What was the next thing? Why, to keep her at Dunkerque awhile at least, and try to “wangle” a permit for that purpose.

“And when you go back again,” he said, “perhaps your husband will follow you!”

“How’s that?”

The sergeant had received another letter from Maupeou: “He talks about a situation at the Ministry. I know, if I were you——”

What! Jean escaping from that prison! Andrée was struck with wonder at this crowning mercy, so unhopèd-for.

She expressed her wish to send a telegram.

“To whom?”

“Mamma.”

“What for?”

“Why, to make her easy about you!”

"Hum! I'll bet she wanted to stop you from coming!"

"You don't know her! Do you know what she's never stopped preaching to me? Forgiveness. And what she was never tired of proving to me? The madness of a complete break."

"Yet another," observed Gandolphe, "who is shown to be different from what you thought."

Dear old sergeant! From the first moments of their renewed intimacy, his name had been so often on Darboise's lips that Andrée got prettily impatient—"I shall be jealous of him!" She was stupefied at first when Jean had summed up for her the odd yet logical train of circumstances which had betrothed Gandolphe and Sylvaine:

"No! And so unsuited to each other, they seem to me!"

And then she accepted the matter as just one miracle among the others.

When she saw him again, she said:

"Jean's been telling me that we're going to be cousins."

"Who can say yet!" he replied, with a tone of secret sadness which surprised her a little.

They were proposing to dine at the d'Estignards, and the sergeant would go with them. Could there be any pleasure in it without him?

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The train had deposited them in the Place de l'Église. It was cold, wet, and windy; but Andrée,

holding Jean's arm tightly, whispered to him, "How good it is to be alive!"

She was gleeful as a child at the thought of their host's surprise at the villa when they saw them. Darboise shared her delight, and dreamed as he walked. And Gandolphe's affectionate smile dwelt on them.

They rang, and then, as intimate friends of the house, pushed open the gate.

Sylvaine appeared at the top of the steps and came down to meet them. Mischievously, Andrée went round and hid behind some bushes. She had meant to cry "Cuckoo!" on her—but she was silenced and troubled by the anxiety and even consternation depicted on the girl's face. Sylvaine went straight to Gandolphe, who nodded his head as he greeted her:

"Yes, it is so," he said.

"You are going?"

"I'm going."

"Where to?" Jean asked, astounded.

Andrée had come up, and the young girl suddenly realised her cousin's presence:

"You! *You!*"

She ran to her and kissed her, but her thoughts seemed elsewhere. Darboise scented some disaster:

"What's the matter?"

"What, indeed!" said Sylvaine: "Don't you know? He's taken out of the Auxiliary and they're sending him to the front!"

"To the front? Impossible!" cried Darboise.

"Yes, quite true!" said the sergeant; "I've been re-examined."

"When?"

"This morning."

"And—taken back, with your eyesight, with——"

"It's equal to a certificate of good health, at least!"

Sylvaine had known the result of the examination since noon, through Dr. Alquier. The Council, it appeared, had hesitated to give a decision, but Corentin had put his shoulder to the wheel.

They looked at each other blankly. In vain did Gandolphe try to change the subject and turn the conversation on to Madame Darboise's coming, so unexpected, so delightful for everybody.

"But it's unheard-of!" Jean repeated: "Demand another examination!"

"Never in this world! I'm not going to say that the decision delights me, nor that I count on being very much use. But I shall go where they send me. That's the first thing, in these days."

"This shall be our engagement dinner," the young girl had declared.

So it was a family party, and she glided into unconstrained sweetness. But a secret oppression weighed upon all hearts.

Gandolphe alone showed a lively humour which had nothing of affectation in it. Was he forcing

himself? Anyway, it was impossible to catch him at a loss for an answer. Every allusion to his ill-luck provoked him to sprightly retorts:

"Don't let's exaggerate my ill-luck! There are several millions of us in the same boat!"

He said he had it from an undeniable source that he would be put into a Territorial unit:

"We shall only be in the second line. Shall I be risking much more than I am here?"

Was he telling the truth? Amid the mild excitement that the end of dinner brings, they were disposed to believe him. Seated at his wife's side Jean derived from her nearness a sort of devout optimism. The two older d'Estignards also yielded to the mirage,—why, yes, *this* prospective son-in-law, at his age, would be less exposed than the other one was. And even Sylvaine's face expressed—how tenderly!—a sort of serenity recovered.

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They took their leave early. The sky was black and the wind rising, and heavy rain lashed their faces. Andrée murmured:

"I'm glad you're leaving this climate!"

The tram came up. Only Andrée found a place inside, and the two men stood on the platform.

"What a day it's been, now!" said Jean.

"A propitious one!"

"Not for everybody!"

"If the sum-total of good things bears them along with it."

"And you,—honestly, what mind are you in about it?"

"I'm seeking reasons for resigning, and I'm finding them. Don't you think that, for one who aspires to play a big part and to exercise some sort of authority after the war, it will be better—to have been—there?"

"Certainly." •

"And then—" In a low voice, the sergeant confided to him the immense progress made by him—today:

"In her affections. If for nothing else than that, this is a lucky day."

He sighed:

"Perhaps—that's necessary; I must go into danger that she may love me, that she may really love me. The instinct of women!"

Jean was again of the same opinion: "That's true."

And as he and Andrée had just exchanged ardent looks through the glass door, he was inclined to be satisfied with this facile reasoning.

Gandolphe went on:

"Do you know what they told me at the Bureau? That little Cazenave has applied for leave for his wedding?"

"Really?" said Jean. He guessed whom the Bordelais was marrying.

• • • • •

The tram was clanging its way through the

streets of Dunkerque, already dark and deserted. After a while, Darboise ventured:

"And your little ones, sergeant?"

"What touches me most is that they've offered—not she only, but her parents—to have them brought to Malo. What would you advise?"

"To accept."

"And I intrust them to you all, if—if anything—happens to me."

"What do you think may happen to you?" said Jean, pretty buoyantly.

"Ah! The regiment I'm going to never attacks; but it loses a hundred men a month."

Silence followed. The sergeant seemed lost in thought; his eyes were wandering over the murky expanse outside, the landscape which they could but dimly see and knew to be desolate.

The flame of a gas-lamp flickering in the wind marked the first houses of St. Pol. They got out.

"I'll go with you as far as your door," said the sergeant.

Fierce squalls opposed their steps, and icy rain stung their faces. The starless sky was still heavy and obscure. Jean took hold of his wife's arm, and the sergeant paddled along in the mud, having yielded them the footpath.

After a hundred yards of it, and by way of saying something, Jean said:

"What I owe to you, old chap!"

"What we owe you!" Andrée repeated.

"What a Providence you were to us!"

"I've done what I could. Happen what may to me, now!"

This was no longer the merry tone they had heard all the evening. It had the sound of fatalism, certainly, but begloomed and almost bitter. As Darboise added those words to the sentence that had already escaped Gandolphe a little while before, he guessed what dread was shuddering in the depths of that soul. Very natural, too, alas! He himself, what apprehension choked him!

Here was another who was going away, yes—to the wintry mud of the trenches. All misery awaited him—and the last menace of all hung over him! Was that noble-hearted maiden once more to see him she had chosen taken away? Had those little ones found their father only to lose him again? A gust of wind brought them the boom of a gun which every evening used to renew its thunder in the direction of Dixmude. Would it be that gun which——?

Jean felt his heart torn asunder. This friend and brother and master, was it necessary that he also should go yonder whence so few return, after Claude Boucheron and the rest—he, a genius in his sphere, he the high-minded philosopher?

They arrived in front of the house.

While Darboise was feeling for his key, a ray from the electric lamp gave him a glimpse of the triumphant love in the eyes of his wife, a look of rapture which reproached the contrasted decrees of Fate. He reddened, and took the sergeant's

hand. And Andrée, releasing Jean's arm, made the same affectionate movement:

"Ah!" she said: "We should be happy,—why must it be this that spoils everything—this that has happened to you——"

Gandolphe remained silent a moment, returning their friendly clasp. Then he said, in a fervent and serious voice:

"Don't let us complain even of that. As long as the war lasts, it would be wrong to be happy!"

THE END

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